

**“My faith (*dad-pa*) is growing inside of me”: The Chos-thog chen-  
mo Ritual Dance in a Tibetan Bon community in Amdo mTsho-  
sngon (Qinghai) Province**



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**Note:**

In this thesis, Tibetan words are transliterated according to the Wylie system, using hyphens to join words that are intended to be read together. For titles, personal names and geographical names I have capitalized the root letter of the first syllable, and for the titles of texts, I have also given the complete title in italics. In the case where a Tibetan word appears at the beginning of a paragraph, I have capitalized the root letter of the first syllable. Tibetan terms in the plural have not been written with the English plural -s, as this would cause confusion with the Tibetan spellings. Standard pinyin transliteration has been used for Chinese terms.

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6. *gTor-ma* of Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin.



7. *gTor-ma* of dBal-gsas rngam-pa.



8. *gTor-ma* of 'Bum-pa.



9. *gTor-ma* of male Bon protectors.



10. *gTor-ma* of female Bon protectors.

From right to left (1) rMa-chen spom-ra, (2) gNam-lha, (3) dMu-bdud, (4) dMu-dpon, (5) A-bse rgyal-ba and (6) Nyi-pang-sad.

From left to right (1) Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo, (2) Yum-sras, (3) sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong, (4) dBal-mo, (5) sMan-mo and (6) dMar-lam gong-'og bar-gsum.





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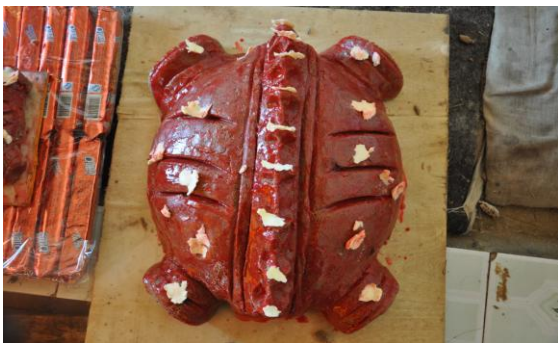
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16. *bsKang-gtor*.



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51. dMu-bdud-'byams.



52. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo.



53. rMa-chen spom-ra.



54. A-bse rgyal-ba.



55. Brag-btsan.



56. dMu-dpon.



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**Note:** All the above pictures were taken in sPyi-tshang A-rgya-sting village on 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 2011, except pictures 47, 56, 58, 66, 67 (from Bon-brgya Monastery 22 September, 2011), pictures 8, 22, 59 (from Gling-rgyal Bon-tshang-ma village 7 January, 2012) and picture 57 (from Khyung-po village 7 January, 2011).





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# 1. Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Defining the topic

The topic of this thesis is Chos-thog chen-mo<sup>1</sup>, a Bon ritual that is practiced in Bon communities in Reb-gong County, Qinghai Province, in the People's Republic of China. Chos-thog chen-mo is performed twice a year, in spring and in fall. According to the Chinese calendar, the spring ritual is held on the fifth day of the first lunar month. In the fall, the ritual is held on the eighth day of the tenth lunar month. All the Bonpos (*Bon-po*)<sup>2</sup> from the five Bon communities in Reb-gong County participate in this ritual and the five communities take it in turns to host it. Thus, the spring and fall rituals are held in different locations and hosted by different villages. Although I will examine all aspects of the ritual, the ritual dance held on the third day is of particular interest. The ways in which the laity express their faith during the ritual, and especially during the dance, will also be discussed.

## 1.2 Motivation for choosing the topic and research question

I have watched the ritual dance since I was very young. “You did not dare to watch the dance when you first saw it, and your sister took you home to escape the dance”, my mother told me, talking about my first reaction to the dance. Growing up, I had a strong desire to see it, because on that day I could wear my new clothes that had been stored away during the whole year, and I could see the frightening masks. I was only able to watch the dance every second year, due to the distance between the Bonpo villages.

Later, the question, “What are the dancers?” came into my mind. “They are the divinities that you will see when you are on the way to the next life (*tshe phyi-ma*)” was the answer I got. Again, my childhood fear of seeing them came into my mind. This time, however, I did not want to escape, but rather wanted to stay, to understand more.

In my experience, rituals and festivals are usually understood by lay Bonpos in Reb-gong in very

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<sup>1</sup> *Chos-thog* is a colloquial expression that refers to any ritual. *Chen-mo* means great, a name given to the ritual by people from Reb-gong because it is the largest and most important Bon ritual in Reb-gong. Chos-thog chen-mo is primarily a lay ritual, in which the monastic community is not involved.

<sup>2</sup> A practitioner of the Bon religion.

simple ways. For example, the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual is seen simply as chanting and the ritual dance as entertainment. Although ritual is one of the most important components of Tibetan culture, there is a significant gap between what the *bon-gshen* consider to be the deeper meaning of such religious activities and laypeople's understanding of them. My intention is to discuss this gap.

## 1.3 Theory and methodology

### 1.3.1 Theory

The use of theories to analyze rituals can help to open up new perspectives and make the ritual itself more intelligible. Being a native of Reb-gong enables me to access local knowledge about the cultural heritage of this area. In the analysis of the material I have gathered, therefore, I will focus on providing detailed and comprehensive data about the ritual. Although I will not use any particular theory to analyze the ritual as whole because sometimes theories could distort understanding the meaning of a ritual, concepts such as *mana*, ultimate concern, and social function can still be useful analytical tools in gaining a greater understanding of different aspects of some parts of the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual.

*Mana*, an impersonal supernatural force that is often set apart from mundane things, can be found in many of the world's religions. The religious ritual, and the ritual dance in particular, has a power which mundane things like cooking food, watching television, or washing clothes have. The ritual dance can invoke an ineffable feeling in the participants that causes them to go into a trance in which they cry, jump, laugh and dance. People experience the intrusion of an external power, accompanied by complete or partial mental dissociation, and often exciting visions. From a religious perspective, accordingly, we can say that the ritual dance of Chos-thog chen-mo has supernatural power - *mana*.

'Ultimate concern' is a useful concept in understanding what the ritual means to people,<sup>3</sup> especially when it comes to analyzing the merit (*bsod-nams*) and virtue (*dge-pa*) that is associated with Chos-thog chen-mo. To be a donor for Chos-thog chen-mo, even those with a low income should be prepared to spend at least 50,000 RMB. Most people who have been such

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<sup>3</sup> Tillich 1936: 6.

donors are willing to sacrifice hard-earned money to accumulate merit and perform virtuous acts in order to achieving their ‘ultimate concern’, such as obtaining a good rebirth and eventually becoming enlightened. So Tibetans make religious sacrifices for no material reward, but rather for the sake of their ultimate concern. This gives meaning to their lives.

Social function is another useful analytical tool in helping us to understand certain aspects of the ritual. When people have a very strong sense of community, the ritual will serve to perpetuate the stability of that community. During my research, a woman told me after the ritual dance that since we are so busy in our daily lives, we sometime forget that we are Tibetan. Every time she saw a religious ritual, her sense of being Tibetan was strengthened. Another man told me that since we Tibetans have this kind of special culture, we are unique in the world. He hoped that it would continue to flourish in the future. Thus, we can clearly see that people’s sense of belonging is affirmed by the ritual and that such rituals help to maintain the stability of the Tibetan community.

### **1.3.2 Methodology**

This study is based on two periods of fieldwork in June/July 2011 and October 2011. I employed a range of techniques in order to collect the information needed, in particular semi-structured qualitative interviews, and participant observation. I chose to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews rather than structured interviews as the semi-structured interview is more flexible and adaptable to the situation. This allowed me to talk and ask questions more freely, and as a result I obtained a great deal of unexpected, but useful and further information that I would have missed if I had conducted the interviews in a more structured way.

In addition, I have taken pictures of the rituals and filmed both the ritual dance and people going into trance. This material was important when I conducted interviews, to refresh the memories of my interviewees.

I took notes and recorded the all information that I gathered. I thus obtained several different types of data: narrative data, comparative data, contextual data, historical data and affective data. The narrative data include stories about the origins of the Bon religion of Reb-gong and the possible origins of several deities. The comparative data include information about the origin of the ritual dance. The contextual data include background information on the Bon

community in Reb-gong. The affective data include people's feelings towards the ritual dance, people's experiences of going into trance, and the views of people who do not go into trance on this phenomenon.

In relation to the narrative data, comparative data, contextual data, and historical data, I had four key informants. The first was A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin whom I had the good fortune to meet in Beijing when I was travelling to Reb-gong for my second period of fieldwork in October 2011. He is the second most important lama in Bon-brgya monastery in Reb-gong. He, together with my second key informant bsTan-pa dar-rgyas from Bon-brga monastery, provided me with useful information about the ritual dance, ritual procedures, *gtor-ma*, deities and ritual objects. My other informants are one monk from Bon-brgya monatery, six *bon-gshen* who have had the experience of participating in the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual from their young age. They provided me with very useful information about ritual procedures. In this thesis I give them the pseudonyms bKra-shis, Nyi-ma, bsTan-'dzin, Tshe-ring, 'Jigs-med and 'O-rgyan.

To collect the affective data I interviewed more than ten laypeople who have attended the ritual dance since they were children, and have experienced going into trance. Finally, I interviewed a fairly large number of laypeople who have not experienced trance to ask them their opinions about people going into trance during the ritual. These interviewees are anonymous in this thesis.

In addition to the information that I collected from my fieldwork in 2011, I have also made use of data about the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual which I collected in 2008 and 2009, some of which I used for my BA thesis at Qinghai Normal University. I conducted participant observations of the ritual in Khyung-bo thang, Hor snyan-bzang, rGya-bo, sKyi-tshang and Gling-rgya. I have therefore conducted participant observation of the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual in all five of the main Bon communities in Reb-gong between 2008 and 2011.

## 1.4 Secondary sources

Many Tibetan rituals have been analyzed in *Tibetan Ritual*, published in 2010<sup>4</sup>, although no material is found in this book regarding the performance of Chos-thog chen-mo specifically. I obtained useful information about individual deities, the functions of ritual drums and the

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<sup>4</sup> Cabezón 2010.



procedures for making *gtor-ma*<sup>5</sup> from scriptures which my informants chant daily, and from which they read extracts aloud for me. Furthermore, two articles written by A-lags Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho provide useful information regarding the history of Bon in Reb-gong.

Some work has been done on religious dance in general, most notably by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1976) and Ellen Pearlman (2002). Both provide useful general information about masks and costumes. I found “Three Sacred Bon Dances (’cham)” (Karmay 2009) to be particularly relevant for this paper. Karmay reports that “there are three most important Bonpo sacred dances: Ma-rgyud tshogs-’cham, gZe-ma dgu-’cham and gShen-rab g.yung-drung dgu-’cham”.<sup>6</sup> The second one has little in common with the ritual dance in Chos-thog chen-mo, while the first involves similar offerings (*tshogs*) and the last one share the same Bon protectors, Srid-pa’i rgyal-mo and bTsan. Nebesky-Wojkowitz briefly compares ritual dance in Bon and in Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> However, this comparison is too short and lacking in detail to be useful. In addition, *The Oracles and Demons of Tibet* by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975), *Bon, the Magic Word* by Samten G Karmay and Jeff Watt (2009) and *The Bon Religion of Tibet* by Per Kværne (1996) give useful information on individual deities.

There are many studies on trance in Tibetan religion, but none of them provide information about the trance known as the ‘descent of blessings’ (*byin-rlabs-’bab*), the Tibetan term that is associated with the ritual dance in Chos-thog chen-mo. All in all, there is no publication exclusively dedicated to Chos-thog chen-mo, the ritual dance and the ‘descent of blessings’ trance. Thus, my aim is to provide a fairly detailed description of the performance of the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual, the ritual dance and the trance phenomenon associated with it.

## 1.5 Reb-gong County

Reb-gong is located in the south-east of Qinghai Province, 188km from Xinning City, the capital of Qinghai (figure1). It was declared a county in 1929. At that time, 90% of the inhabitants were Tibetan, and the rest were Chinese, Muslim, and Monguor. As time went other ethnic groups

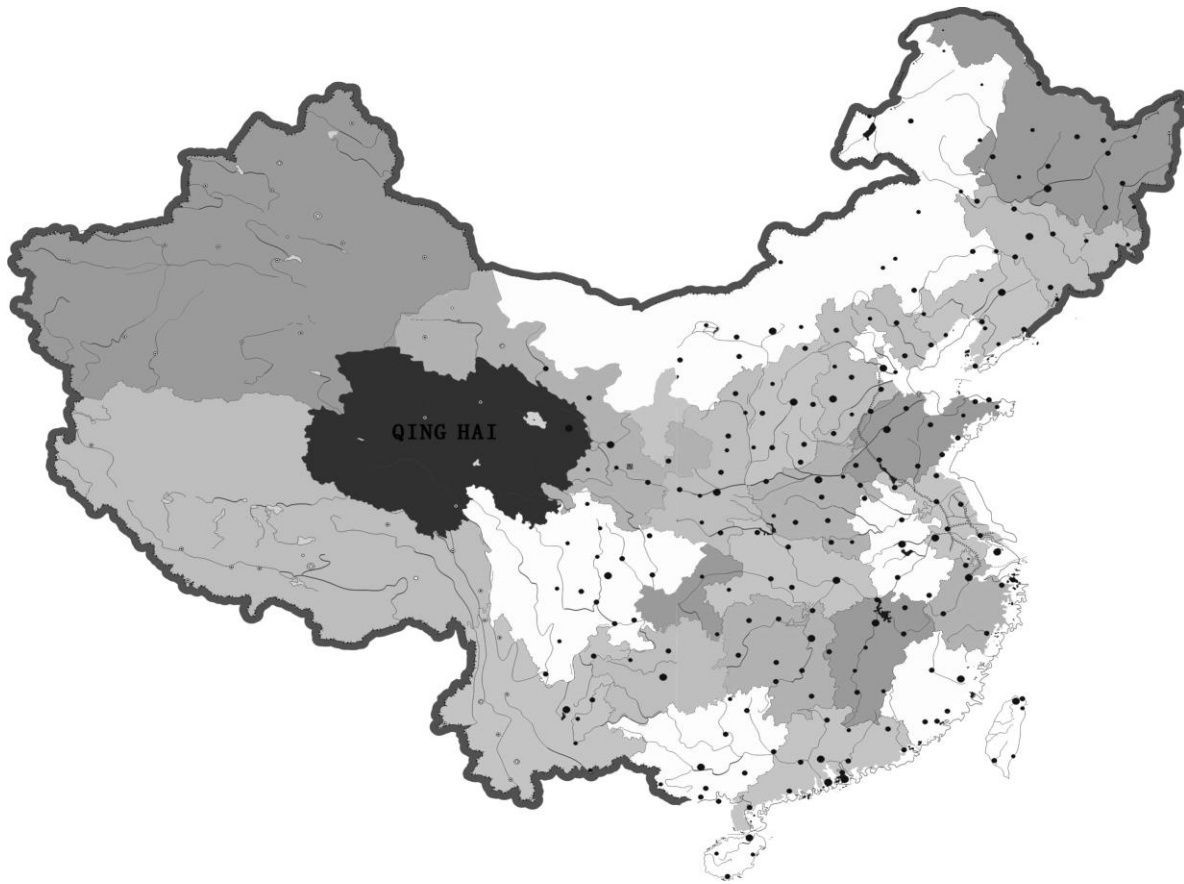
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<sup>5</sup> Dough-figures made mostly of barley flour (*rtsam-pa*) and butter. They have different forms according to their purpose. For further discussion of *gtor-ma*, see Chapter Four.

<sup>6</sup> Karmay 2009: 190-199.

<sup>7</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976: 9-10.

migrated to this county. The population in 1990 was 68,349, of whom 69.44% were Tibetan, 12.93% Chinese, 10.94%, Monguor, 5.87% Muslims, and rest Mongolian, Bao an, and Manchu.<sup>8</sup>



Map of Qinghai Province

Reb-gong County consists of twelve townships and one town, Rong-bo, which is the political, economic, and cultural center of the county. The largest and most famous Gelug monastery in Reb-gong is Rong-bo dpal-gyi dgon-chen bde-chen chos-'khor located in Rong-bo.

## 1.6 Religious tradition in Reb-gong

There are three main religious traditions in Reb-gong: the Nyingma<sup>9</sup> and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and the Bon tradition. The Gelug is the most powerful one.

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<sup>8</sup> Tongren xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1999: 206.

<sup>9</sup> Another important Buddhist school in Tibet. The history of this school is usually traced back to Padmasambhava (Kværne 2002: 262).

According to statistics from 2000, there are ten Nyingma monasteries, with 293 monks and 27 reincarnate lamas in Reb-gong and rTse-khog<sup>10</sup> counties. The first monastery in Reb-gong was built in 1747.<sup>11</sup> The most famous lama of the Nyingma pa school in Reb-gong was Zha dkar Tshogs-drug rang-grol (1781-1851).<sup>12</sup> He was the abbot of the sKar-ma bkra-shis 'khyil monastery<sup>13</sup> in Reb-gong.

Furthermore, there are 41 Gelug monasteries, with 2,015 monks and 20 reincarnate lamas in Reb-gong and rTse-khog counties.<sup>14</sup> Shar sKal-ldan rgya-mtsho is the most important lama in Reb-gong. Today, the eighth Shar sKal-ldan rgya-mtsho resides in Rong-bo monastery.

There is one Bon monastery in Reb-gong, Bon-brgya monastery, with 80 monks.<sup>15</sup> Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho is the resident lama of this monastery. A study of the deities depicted in the wall paintings in this monastery was done by Masahide Mori in 2000.<sup>16</sup> There are 23 Bon villages and fifteen village temples in Reb-gong, all of which are considered branches of Bon-brgya monastery.<sup>17</sup> Senior Bonposin Reb-gong are known colloquially as *dpon* and *a-khu Bonpo*, and more formally as *bon-gshen*. They are the local priests and ritual specialists who invoke the deities. I will use the term *bon-gshen* throughout this paper, this corresponds to the Buddhist term *sngags-pa*. In the following section I discuss the possible origins of the Bon religion in Reb-gong by discussing the historical background of several central religious figures and that of Bon-brgya monastery.

## 1.7 The Bon religion

Adherents of Bon believe that Bon was founded by sTon-pa gShen-rab long before Buddhism came to Tibet, Ol-mo lung-ring<sup>18</sup> sometimes located in Zhang-zhung<sup>19</sup>. Bon religion is alive, and

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<sup>10</sup> rTse-khog is located 107km south of Rong-bo. Most people from this county are nomadic. Although Reb-gong and rTse-khog are politically two separate counties, religiously they are one community and they hold their major religious events together.

<sup>11</sup> Ma Chengjun 2003: 159.

<sup>12</sup> Ma Chengjun 2003:160.

<sup>13</sup> The most famous Nyingma monastery in Reb-gong.

<sup>14</sup> Ma Chengjun 2003:166.

<sup>15</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 285.

<sup>16</sup> Karmay and Nagano (eds.) 2000: 509-515.

<sup>17</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 287-289.

<sup>18</sup> 'Ol-mo lung-ring, according to Bon tradition, was the birthplace of gShen-rab and was located in sTag-gzig. sTag-

flourishing today, not only in Tibet, (especially in Khams and Amdo) but also in Nepal (Dolpo and Lubra) and in the Tibetan exile community in India.<sup>20</sup> The philosophy and rituals of Bon are similar to those of Buddhism, but Bonpos usually consider Bon to be the original religion of Tibet.

Both Buddhism and Bon share a common heritage in Tibet and follow the same methods of accumulating religious merit as the ultimate goal of life is obtaining rebirth as a human being, or as an inhabitant of one of the many paradisiacal worlds of Tibetan cosmology. However, there are several specific elements that distinguish the Buddhist tradition from Bon. In Bon, the sacred mantra is not the Buddhist ‘*Oṃ ma-ṇi pad-me huṃ*’, but ‘*O ma-tri-mu ye sa-le du*’. The Bon swastika, the symbol of the religion, turns to the left, as opposed to the Buddhist swastika which turns to the right. Bonpos call their religion *g.yung-drung bon* which literally means the ‘unchanging truth’ and refers to the unchanging doctrine in which truth is expressed. Ritual movements by Bonpos, including circumambulating sacred places and turning prayer wheels, are always made in a counter-clockwise direction, whilst Buddhists perform them in a clockwise direction. This may give rise to the false impression that Bon is the opposite of Buddhism. Both traditions are largely identical the cults of the innumerable deities of Tibetan religion, but the deities differ in regard to their names, mythological origins, characteristic colors and the objects held in their hands or adorning the bodies.<sup>21</sup>

Bonpos believe that in the course of their history they suffered two persecutions<sup>22</sup>. The first was during the reign of the legendary Tibetan king Gri-gum btsan-po, the second was during the reign of King Khri-srong sde-btsan (c. 742-797)<sup>23</sup>. Both Bon and Buddhism were persecuted during

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gzig has not been clearly located, and western scholars have suggested that it may have been in Persia. However, by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it had come to be viewed as a very special land which no ordinary human being can reach, attainable only through their visions or by supernatural means after being spiritually purified. Thus, it has been regarded as a counterpart of the Buddhist holy land of Shambhala (Kværne 1996: 17 and Karmay 1972: xxviii).

<sup>19</sup> Zhang-zhung was an independent country where the Bon is believed by Bonpos to have prospered until it was finally conquered by the Tibetan empire in the seventh century. It was then converted to Buddhism and assimilated into Tibetan culture. It seems to have been situated in present-day western Tibet, with Mount Kailash as its center (Kværne 1996: 13 and Karmay 1972: xxx).

<sup>20</sup> Kværne 1996:14.

<sup>21</sup> Kværne 1996: 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Martin 2001: 11. It has been suggested by Karmay 1972: xxxi-xxxiii and Kværne 1974: 29 that the Bonpo historians have made two persecutions out of one.

<sup>23</sup> Karmay 2007: 58.

the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)<sup>24</sup>.

## 1.8 Tibetan ritual and cosmology

Tibetan culture is replete with rituals. Everywhere you go, you see people carrying rosaries and reciting prayers. On holy and auspicious days<sup>25</sup>, monks and tantric specialists assemble in their monasteries and temple assembly halls to perform rituals. Laypeople do their best to assist the performers of the ritual by providing food, or whatever they can offer. Women perform fasting rituals (*smyung-gnas*)<sup>26</sup>. The importance of ritual, and in particular chanting, is underscored by the traditional Bon explanation of the term *bon*, as equivalent to *gyer*, ‘to chant’.<sup>27</sup> However, it is difficult to comprehend Tibetans’ passion for performing rituals without understanding their cosmological worldview. Tibetans see themselves as living in a universe populated by Buddhas, deities, powerful gods and demigods who live in various heavenly realms, and by spirits connected to particular sites in the natural landscape.<sup>28</sup>

Tibetans view the boundary between the human and non-human as permeable. Rituals are often considered to be one of the most important mediums through which communication between humans and non-humans can take place, and through which non-humans can intervene in the human world.<sup>29</sup> Chos-thog chen-mo is one of these rituals. *Bon-gshen* engage in this ritual practice to invoke various deities and request them to intervene in worldly matters on behalf of the communities, and to communicate with lesser spirits.<sup>30</sup>

## 1.9 Bon in Reb-gong

According to Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho<sup>31</sup>, about 10,000 years ago gSer-thog lce-

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<sup>24</sup> Karmay 2007: 64.

<sup>25</sup> New or full moon days and the third, fifth, eighth and last day of every month are usually considered to be holy and auspicious days. Other days when great lamas or other men were born or died are also considered holy and auspicious.

<sup>26</sup> A ritual that is mostly performed by women and it lasts for two days. The performers eat lunch without meat, garlic and onion, and only drink milk tea for both breakfast and dinner on the first day. They do not eat anything for second day.

<sup>27</sup> Snellgrove 1976: 1.

<sup>28</sup> Cabezón 2010:3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Cabezón 2010: 4.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a Bon-gshen in Khyung-po village July, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter Two.



'byams, a Bonpo scholar from the Qinghai area, who is counted among the six great scholars of the human world (*'dzam-gling mkhas-pa rgyan-drug*) in Bon tradition, is believed to have spread the Bon religion in Qinghai.<sup>32</sup> During the reign of King Khri-srong sde-bstan (c. 742-797), the great scholar Dran-pa nam-mkha'<sup>33</sup> came to Reb-gong and built A-ba ngos-bzang<sup>34</sup> monastery.<sup>35</sup> It is believed to have been located near Dran-ba nam-mkha's cave, one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Reb-gong. No physical traces of the monastery have been discovered.

During the reign of Glang dar-ma<sup>36</sup> (c. 930), three siddhas (*grub-thob-pa*) named sPyi-rting 'khor-lo, Ngo-mo Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal and Khyung-dkar Tshangs-pa, fled to Reb-gong from Central Tibet to escape religious persecution. The first place they reached was called Chad-lung thang. According to the legend, at that time there was a poisonous tree in Chad-lung thang. People and animals that looked at the tree went blind, and those who stood underneath it died immediately. The three siddhas used *gtor-ma* to destroy the tree. From the remains of the tree they made 1,900 magic daggers (*phur-bu*) and many ritual drums (*sgrub-rnga*). They expressed a wish that there would be many Bonpos in Reb-gong in the future. So the Bonpo in Reb-gong are called the 'Bon Tantrist Collectivity of Reb-gong, the 1,900 Ritual Dagger Holders (*Reb-gong bon-mang phur-thog stong dang dgu-rgya*).<sup>37</sup> After the destruction of the poisonous tree, the three brothers' fame spread throughout Reb-gong. sPyi-rting 'khor-lo resided in sPyi-tshang<sup>38</sup> village, Ngo-mo Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal resided in Ngo-mo<sup>39</sup> village and Khyung-dkar Tshangs-ba resided in Khyung-po<sup>40</sup> village. Their spiritual tradition and their disciples spread over the whole of Reb-gong.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the fifth Panchen Lama bsTan-pa'i dbang-phyug

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<sup>32</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 232.

<sup>33</sup> He was an important figure in Bon tradition in the eighth century A. D. It is said that he was obliged to adopt Buddhism in order to save the Bon teachings from total eradication (Karmay 2007:75-76. See also Kværne 1996:119, 128-129).

<sup>34</sup> It is believed that the monastery was located about 25km north of Reb-gong County.

<sup>35</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 278.

<sup>36</sup> A practitioner of Bon who ascended to the throne by killing his brother, and tried to eliminate Buddhism.

<sup>37</sup> Most Bon-gshen in Reb-gong know this legend. See also Bon-brgya 2011: 278.

<sup>38</sup> In rGya-bo Township.

<sup>39</sup> In rGya-bo Township.

<sup>40</sup> In sMad-pa township.

(1854-1882)<sup>41</sup> ordered a great scholar called Shes-rab rnam-rgyal to go to Amdo to support the Bon religion there. As ordered, he went to Reb-gong and supported Bon-brgya monastery, g.Yung-drung kun-khyab gling monastery in the east, gNam-tseng zhwa-dkar gling monastery in the north and over twenty Bon villages.<sup>42</sup> Under Ma Bufang (1903–1975),<sup>43</sup> all the monasteries except Bon-brgya were burned down, and from the war lord then on Bon-brgya was the only Bon monastery in Reb-gong. During the Cultural Revolution, it too was destroyed completely.<sup>44</sup> Fortunately, some *bon-gshen* practiced their religion in secret and made a great contribution to the revival of the religion in Reb-gong when they were granted religious freedom in 1981.<sup>45</sup>

The Bon villages in Reb-gong fall into four main groups: sMad-phyogs bon-mang, sTod-phyogs bon-mang, sNyan-bzang bon-mang and Yar-nang bon-mang. The last group does not participate in Chos-thog chen-mo. The other groups are further divided into five main Bon communities (*chos-rtsa*)<sup>46</sup> that host the Chos-thog chen-mo, and it is these groups which are the topic of this thesis.

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<sup>41</sup> The fifth Panchen Lama bsTan-pa'i dbang-phyug (1854-1882) was born into the Bru family, an important Bon lineage family. The second Panchen Lama Blo-bzang Ye-shes (1663-1737) was also born into this family (Karmay 2007: 69-70).

<sup>42</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 279.

<sup>43</sup> The leader of a group of Muslims who ruled Qinghai, Gansu and Ningxia in north-western China from the 1910s until 1949.

<sup>44</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 281.

<sup>45</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 282.

<sup>46</sup> *Chos-rtsa* literally means the root of *chos* (religion). It refers to the five most important groups in the Bon community in Reb-gong.

## 2. Chapter Two: INTRODUCTION TO CHOS-THOG CHEN-MO

In this chapter, I discuss the names, origins and overall purpose of Chos-thog chen-mo, as well as the participants and the ritual objects used.

### 2.1 The names of the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual

Chos-thog chen-mo is the colloquial expression for this particular ritual that is held in spring and fall. In addition, names like ‘The spring ritual’ (*dpyid-chos*), ‘The great ceremony of Losar’ (*rgya-lo ’i*<sup>47</sup> *sgrub-chen*), ‘The great prayer ceremony’ (*smon-lam sgrub-chen*) and ‘The ritual of Losar’ (*rgya-lo ’i chos-thog*) are given to the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual that is held in spring. Two other names: ‘The great ceremony of October’ (*bcu-pa ’i sgrub-chen*) and ‘The fall ritual’ (*ston-chos*) are given to the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual that is held in the fall. As Chos-thog chen-mo is the name that is used in everyday speech by the people of the five Bon communities, I have chosen to use this term for the ritual throughout this thesis.

### 2.2 The origin and purpose of Chos-thog chen-mo

It is not certain when the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual was established in the Reb-gong region, but according to oral tradition of the *bon-gshen* of this area, it was established by the three siddhas (*grub thob-pa*), sPyi-rting ’khor-lo, Ngo-mo Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal and Khyung-dkar Tshangs-pa discussed above. However, it only flourished during the lifetimes of rTse-zhig stong-nyid bya-phur<sup>48</sup>, A-lags Shes-rab<sup>49</sup> and Drungs-rims pa Shes-rab rnam-rgyal<sup>50</sup> and mKhar-nag sku-phreng.<sup>51</sup> The reason that the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual is held on the fifth day of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar to commemorate mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan (1356-

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<sup>47</sup> Losar is colloquially known to locals of Reb-gong as ‘chinese year’ (*rgya-lo*). This might be the reason Losar is celebrated by the inhabitants of Amdo according to the Chinese lunar calendar, not the Tibetan calendar or it could equally well be the other way round.

<sup>48</sup> He was the founder of rTse-zhig Monastery in bSang-chu, Xiahe County in Gansu Province, 3 km north of Xiahe County town and is the only Bon monastery in this county. Since Bya-phur is a well-known Bon family in rNga-ba he might belong to this family.

<sup>49</sup> He became the master of many temples and monasteries in Amdo during the eleventh century.

<sup>50</sup> He is the nephew of A-lags Shes-rab. He traveled to central Tibet and studied in sMan-ri monastery in gTsang for many years. He had close ties with fifth Panchen Lama who offered him a title and seal investing him with authority over all the Bonpo monasteries throughout Amdo became known as rTs-zhig Drung-rims pa.

<sup>51</sup> He was a famous *bon-gshen*, but it is difficult to ascertain his dates of birth and death with any precision.

1415)<sup>52</sup>, who is said to have come as a vulture to see his successor Rin-chen rgyal-mtshan (b.1360) on these days. As a result it is seen as the best time to invoke the tutelary deities (*yi-dam*)<sup>53</sup>, and it is believed that prayers (*smon-lam*) made on this day can be easily fulfilled. There is no particular religious reasons to hold the autumn ritual on the eighth day of the tenth lunar month, according to my informant bKra-shis, it is the best time for holding the ritual because at this point there is no farming activities, as well as the weather is neither too hot nor too cold.

In addition, Bon villages of Reb-gong are the main recipients of merit from Chos-thog chen-mo. According to the Bon tradition, after Chos-thog chen-mo, the four elements (*'byung-bzhi*)<sup>54</sup> of the villages are balanced and remain under the protection of local deities (*yul-lha gzhi-bdag*), the eight classes of gods and spirits (*lha-srin sde-brgyad*), and the warrior spirits (*dgra-lha*). Furthermore, it is believed that the ritual can bring timely rain.

## 2.3 Participants in the ritual

There are various groups of participants in Chos-thog chen-mo, each playing a different role. In the following section, I will describe each of them according to their position in the ritual in descending order of importance.

### 2.3.1 Lama

Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-'grub rgya-mtsho is the most important Bon lama in Reb-gong. He comes on the first, or sometimes on the second day of Chos-thog chen-mo to lead the *bon-gshen* in the invocation of the deities, as well as to give the initiations (*dbang*) and transmissions (*lung*) of sacred texts<sup>55</sup>. He sits on the highest throne in the main assembly hall, at the head of the central row. This row is occupied by those *bon-gshen* who are particularly knowledgeable, with the chanting master (*dbu-mdzad*) in the middle, as well as by the musicians. Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-'grub rgya-mtsho was born in 1935 in dMag-sar village in the Yar-nang bon-mang group of

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<sup>52</sup> Who founded the most important monastery of Bon, sMan-ri, in 1405. Karmay 2007: 66. See also Kværne 1991: 373-37.

<sup>53</sup> Tutelary deities whom a person chooses to be his guide and protector, usually their manifestations are wrathful.

<sup>54</sup> Fire (*me*), water (*chu*), wind (*rlung*) and earth (*sa*). It is Tibetan cosmological worldview that the world came into existence in terms of these four elements.

<sup>55</sup> The empowerment that is given by a lama to engage in a religious practice. (Goldstein 2001: 752)

Bon villages. In 1942, he went to the mDa'-chen dkar-mo<sup>56</sup> hermitage and studied there for five years before coming back to Reb-gong to give teachings to his disciples there. During the Cultural Revolution, he was jailed and experienced severe hunger. In 1980, at the age of forty-five, he was ordered by the tenth Panchen Lama Chos-kyi rgyal-mtshan (1938-1989) to take responsibility for reviving the Bon religion in Qinghai. He is now the lama of the Bon-brgya monastery and the religious master (*bstan-bdag*) of all Bon communities in Reb-gong.<sup>57</sup>

### 2.3.2 Monastic disciplinarians

There are two monastic disciplinarians (*dge-bskos*) for Chos-thog chen-mo. The *bon-gshen* in Reb-gong elect two of their number for this role. They are responsible for enforcing the rules of Chos-thog chen-mo. It is said of them '*Lag-tu lcag-tshan thogs-pas dge-bskos 'grig-gi bdag-po*' 'Having iron whips in their hands, they are the kings of the rules'. They can strike anyone who breaks the rules. They are seated together on a high throne, as high as the lama's throne (Appendix 4), which is located between the second and third rows on the left. At lunchtime on the second day, one of the monastic disciplinarians reads out the monastic rules monastic rules (*bca'-yig*)<sup>58</sup> (DC: 391). At noon, the *bon-gshen* drink tea, whilst the other monastic disciplinarian recites the speech to the assembly (*tshogs-gtam*)<sup>59</sup> from memory (picture 36).

### 2.3.3 Chanting master

The chanting master (*dbu-mdzad*) is one of the most important participants in Chos-thog chen-mo. His seat is next to the first pillar of the main assembly hall and it is the third highest seat in the hall, lower only than the thrones of the monastic disciplinarians and the lama (picture 37). His voice is the most important, as he has to lead *bon-gshen* in chanting every scripture during the ritual practice. An aspiring chanting master has to train his voice for several years before he can

<sup>56</sup> Located in mDzo-dge County in Sichun Province

<sup>57</sup> Tshul-khrims bstan-pa 'brug-grags 2011: 1-8.

<sup>58</sup> The new *bca'-yig* was written by A-lags Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho in 2011, *Reb-gong bon-mang phur-thog stong dang dgu-brgya'i bca'-yig* (2011:230-250) in *mKhas-dbang bon-brgya rin-po che'i gsung-rtsom phyogs-bsgrigs / gSol-'debs dang tshogs-mchod skor*. Before this there was no common *bca'-yig* for the Bon community in Reb-gong. However, sMad-phyogs bon-mang had one which was used in every Chos-thog chen-mo. There are three main ideas in this new official notice: introduction of the historical origins of Bon in Reb-gong, the regulations, and the punishment for disregarding the regulations. See another official notice by Krystyna Cech 1985:69-85.

<sup>59</sup> It is a condensed form of monastic rules (*bca'-yig*).

assume begiven this role in Chos-thog chen-mo. My informant bKra-shis said that in the past one person was the chanting master for Chos-thog chen-mo for eighteen years. Nowadays, as the position has become popular, the chanting master is changed every two or three years. In Bon, chanting (*gyer*) is very important and there are particular rhythms for each session of practice (*las-rim*). For instance, the rhythms for peaceful (*zhi*) and wrathful (*drag*) practice are very different. Thus, the chanting master has to be very knowledgeable.

#### 2.3.4 ‘Enthroned Lama’ (*khri-pa bla-ma*)

There is one ‘Enthroned Lama’ (*khri-pa bla-ma*) for each day of Chos-thog chen-mo, and he is responsible for financing the ritual.<sup>60</sup> His throne is placed at the head of third row on the left. Every *bon-gshen* has to be the *khri-pa bla-ma* at least once in his lifetime. If there is no *khri-pa bla-ma* for the ritual, then the village where the Chos-thog chen-mo is held is responsible for the expenses of the ritual. If there is no monastic disciplinarian, then the *khri-pa bla-ma* reads the *bca’-yig* and *tshogs-gtam* the assembly.

#### 2.3.5 Musicians

There are two drummers and, as most chanting except is accompanied by the drums, they need to be fit. The drummers are usually selected from amongst the young *bon-gshen*. 60% of them are young *bon-gshen* who have been chosen by Bonpos to continue the drumming lineage of the family.

Two shawm (*rgya-ling*)<sup>61</sup> blowers participate in the ritual. The shawm blowers are usually talented young *bon-gshen*. The shawms are played when the *bon-gshen* invoke (*bsgrub*) the deities, when the lama arrives, when *bon-gshen* perform a ritual dance as a group and when all the *bon-gshen* walk in line (*ser-phreng*).

Two conch shell<sup>62</sup> blowers and two great trumpet (*dung-chen*)<sup>63</sup> blowers participate in the ritual

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<sup>60</sup> The expenses for the ritual include bread, *rtsam-pa*, butter, the ‘feast offerings’ (*tshogs-rdzas*) and ‘gyed.

<sup>61</sup> The shawm (*rgya-ling*) is a three-foot long trumpet. Mastering it requires long practice.

<sup>62</sup> Conch shells are blown when a *bsang* offering is being made, between the practice sessions, and to summon the Bon-gshen early in the mornings.

<sup>63</sup> Ten-foot-long brass and copper trumpets.

as well. The conches are played to call people to the ritual early in the morning and when *bsang*<sup>64</sup> offerings are being made. The trumpet is played during the sessions of the ritual and ritual dances.

### **2.3.6 Knowledgeable *bon-gshen* and other *bon-gshen***

*Bon-gshen* who are knowledgeable and who have a lot of experience in ritual practice sit in the central row, this being the most important row. Those in the central rows sit facing each other, directly in front of the statue of sTon-pa gShen-rab. The lama's throne is placed on a table just in front of the statue. The seat of the chanting master is located beside the first pillar of this row (picture 34).

Young *bon-gshen* who have *ral-ba*<sup>65</sup> on their heads, but are not so knowledgeable about chanting and the other activities of the ritual sit in the rows on the right and left (picture 35). Some people, who could be an obstacle to the ritual, are not allowed to participate. Usually it is the two monastic who decide whether a person should sit in the right or left row.

### **2.3.7 Recipients**

The recipients (*bskal len-ba*) are the people who do not chant or take part in the ritual, such as students, children and workers (picture 40). Usually they come to the ritual on the second day because on that day the *khri-pa bla-ma* gives money to the participants in the ritual. They leave after they have received the money.

### **2.3.8 Ritual assistants**

There are two groups of ritual assistants: *mchod g.yog-pa* and *mkha'-mgo-pa*. *mChod* means offering, *g.yog-pa* means servant. There are six servants. They do not usually chant, but are responsible for making or moving *gtor-ma* and blowing the conch-shells during the making of *bsang* offerings. The *mkha'-mgo-pa* are unable to chant and do not participate in the ritual. Their main responsibility is to cook meals for the *bon-gshen*.

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<sup>64</sup> A smoke offering of juniper branches, barley flour and many other things such as fruit and candies. See Karmay 2009: 380-412.

<sup>65</sup> The long, uncut hair which is wrapped about the head, and covered by a red or brown turban.



### 2.3.9 Ritual dancers

There are fourteen people in this group and they perform the ritual dance. They are young laypeople who do not have *ral-ba* and are not so knowledgeable with regarding to chanting or the activities of the ritual. They need to follow certain rules for 25 days before the ritual; however, they cannot eat chili or garlic, and cannot sleep with their wives. Moreover, they cannot walk under drain pipes. It is believed that if any of them did not follow the rules there would be consequences. For instance, he might have an accident during the performance.

## 2.4 Ritual objects

There are many ritual instruments and other objects used in Bon rituals. My informant O-'rgyan says that the sounds of ritual instruments are important to the ritual, because they can be used to communicate directly with the deities and spirits. This was also emphasized by Namkhai Norbu: “nine melodies (*gcong-dgu*), nine kinds of sound modulations used for chants during the rites which imitate the voice or song of nine animals and which enable the officiant to communicate directly with the diverse classes of non-human beings”.<sup>66</sup>

During the Chos-thog chen-mo, *bon-gshen* bring their own ritual objects. The large ones, such as great trumpets, banners and flags are stored in the village small temple and are used in important rituals like Chos-thog chen-mo. Different ritual objects are used differently during the sessions of the ritual. Each of them has a particular function and meaning. In the following section I will describe the main ritual objects that are used in Chos-thog chen-mo.

### 2.4.1 Musical instruments

*Ḍā-ma-ru* is a small double-sided hand drum with an hourglass shape, held in the right hand and played by rotating the wrist (picture 23). In the past it was made from human skull, but nowadays it is made from sandal wood (*tsan-dan*). The biggest are twelve fingers deep, medium ones nine and small ones five fingers deep. My informant Tshe-ring said that a few *bon-gshen* in Reb-gong have *Ḍā-ma-ru* made from human skulls which they have inherited from their ancestors.

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<sup>66</sup> Namkhai Norbu 1995: 48.

Its shape symbolizes ‘great bliss’ (*bde-ba chen-po*)<sup>67</sup> and its sound symbolize emptiness (*stong-ba nyid*). It is played together with a hand-bell and used in tantric ritual practice to invoke the deities. It invokes the Mother (*ma*) and 128 ḍākinīs when it is beaten twice, and invokes the Mother (*ma*) and 1128 and 22 ḍākinīs when it is beaten three times. It is very important that the *bon-gshen* place it in front of them in the correct way: the white side of drum, which symbolizes the Father (*yab*), should be on the right and the red side of the drum, which symbolizes the Mother (*yum*), should be on the left.<sup>68</sup>

The flat-bell (*gshang*) are cymbals with no central bosses. They are held upright and played by rotating the wrist so that a small metal ball attached to the cymbal by a string strikes the interior of the cymbal (picture 24). It is only used in all Bon rituals. It is supposed to create a connection with the eight classes of gods and spirits (*lha-srin sde-brgyad*).

The ritual drum (*bsgrub-rnga*) is a very important ritual object (picture 26). It is said that when the three siddhas destroyed the poisoned tree, they made many magic daggers (*phur-bu*) and ritual drums for religious practice. *dBal-gsas rngam-pa'i rnga-rtsa khyung-gsum gyi rim-pa*<sup>69</sup> describes the function of the drum in the following way (my translation):

“The drum of the practitioner sounds as wrathful as thunder. The lightning that comes when the practitioner beats the drum is like stars falling on the earth, the earth is full of fire; the eight nāgas are shaking, frightened. All the male demons are expelled to the right when the drum is beaten towards the right. All the female demons are expelled to the left when the drum is beaten towards the left. All the demons are expelled into the sky when the drum is beaten upwards. The brains of all the mother demons (*ma-bdud*) explode, and evil deeds are subdued when the drum is beaten downwards. The eight classes of gods and spirits are brought under control, the three worlds are full of noise, the three realms are suppressed by the power of the drum, all the demons and obstructers are ground to dust, ma-mo<sup>70</sup> and ḍākinīs become servants when the drum is beaten.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> The paradise that is been achieved by becoming enlightened.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with informant bKra-shis, Khyung-po village, November, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> This is an important text chanted during Chos-thog chen-mo. Most Bon-gshen in Reb-gong have this book.

<sup>70</sup> Ma mo refers to the Goddess or female deities.

<sup>71</sup> sGrub pa po yi rnga sgra 'di/ Drag pa'i 'brug sgra 'u ru ru / rNga brdung glog dmar gyugs se gyugs/ rGyu skar thang la nyi li li/ Sa gzhi thams cad me re re/ Klu chen brgyad po ye re re/ rNga chen g.yas su brdung ba yis/ Pho gdon thams cad g.yas su zlog/ Pho bdud dal kha g.yas su bsgyur/ rNga chen g.yon du brdung ba yis/ Mo gdon thams cad g.yon du zlog/ Mo bdud dal kha g.yon du zlog/ rNga chen steng du brdung ba yis/ sPi bdud dal kha mkha' la

The above text shows how important the ritual drum is during Chos-thog chen-mo. The drum is often considered to be a musical object. My informant bKra-shis told me that he had been the drummer for Chos-thog chen-mo for three years, but he does not know its function. As is made clear by the text above, the sound of the ritual drum can grant control over the all the eight classes of gods and spirits, as well as dispelling demons.

#### 2.4.2 Banners

A parasol (*gdugs*) (picture 27) is used during the arrival and departure of the lama, and when the *bon-gshen* walk in line (*ser-phreng*) on the second day. The victory banner (*rgyal-mtshan*) (picture 28) symbolizes the wish that the Bon religion will prosper in the future and will never vanish. It is used when the *bon-gshen* walk in line.

There are two main flags used in the Chos-thog chen-mo, one on each side of the main assembly hall. Their presence shows that the ritual is taking place. In addition, they symbolize protective deities. The deity depicted on the flag on the right of the hall is Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo<sup>72</sup> and the on the left sGra-bla' i rgyal-mo.<sup>73</sup>

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zlog/ Yas kyi bdud g.yos steng du bsgyur/ rNga chen 'og tu brdung ba yis/ Ma bdud kun kyi klad ba tshal bar 'gems /sDig cen 'byung po thur du gnon/ Drag pa'i rnga sgra 'di sgrog pas/ lHa srin sde brgyad dbang du bsdung/ Khams gsum ma lus chems la 'bebs/ Srid pa gsum ni zil gyis gnon/ dGra bgegs ma lus thal bar rlogs/ Ma mo mkha' 'gro bran du 'khol.

<sup>72</sup> Srid-pa'rgyal-mo is a chief female protector among Bon protectors. It is said that she was originally a demonic being and was subdued to become a Bon protector. See Chapter Six.

<sup>73</sup> She is also a Bon protector who is widely worshiped in Reb-gong County. There are two other names for her: sTag-ri-rong and Nag-mo. See Chapter Six.

### 3. Chapter Three: THE *GTOR-MA* OF CHOS-THOG CHEN-MO

#### 3.1 *gTor-ma* in general

*gTor-ma* are an essential element of Chos-thog chen-mo. The Tibetan term *gtor-ma* denotes dough-figures, made mostly of barley flour (*rtsam-pa*) and butter. They are used both in Buddhist and Bon rituals. It is important that the people who make *gtor-ma* choose the correct ingredients. Using animal foods, substances touched by a murderer, or offerings given to a monastery after someone's death, is forbidden. *gTor-ma* are usually dyed different colors, often white or red. The white dye is made of melted butter, whilst the red dye is 'bru-mog'.<sup>74</sup> They are made in different shapes depending on their purpose: a cone for peaceful deities and a pyramid with a triangular base for wrathful deities.

*gTor-ma* have different uses: some are made and placed on shrines for ceremonies or to represent deities, some are used in the feast rite and consumed by practitioners and laypeople, and others are made to appease spirits, accumulate merit, or remove obstacles. In addition, some are made to represent enemies. There are many different explanations for the term *gtor-ma*. Here I would like to present the explanation I heard from my informant bsTan-pa dar-rgyas, according to *gTor-ma'i gzhun chen-mo*. He told me that *gtor* refers to the hexagram and *ma* refers to awareness; *gtor* refers to method and *ma* refers to wisdom, *gtor* refers to the sky and *ma* refers to the wind, *gtor* refers to 'expel' and *ma* refers to 'protect'.<sup>75</sup> Thus, following this understanding of the term, *gtor-ma* is used in rituals concerned with expelling of the negative forces and bestowing blessings.

It is believed that the base of a *gtor-ma* symbolizes the earth, the middle part is called the 'shoulder' and symbolizes knowledge, and the top symbolizes wisdom. Usually the base should be large and majestic and it is believed it can discipline all beings well and overcome all that appears and 'visible world' (*snang-srid*). A beautiful and grand 'waist' (i.e. the lower part of the *gtor-ma*) grants merit and wealth. The shoulders are supposed to be shaped like the moon on the

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<sup>74</sup> It is the name of the dye made from a plant.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with bsTan-pa dar-rgyas, Rong-bo town, November, 2011. The informant consulted a sacred book called *gTor-ma'i gZhung chen-mo*: 'gtor zhis pa dbyings dang / ma zhes pa ye shes / gtor zhes pa thabs dang/ ma zhes pa shes rab/ gtor zhes pa mkha' dang/ ma zhes ba klong/ gtor zhes pa zlog pa dang/ ma zhes pa srung ba'o'/'



8th day of the month, and it is believed that this shape has the function of gaining blessings immediately. The top of the *gtor-ma* is supposed to be very sharp. It is believed that sharp tops establish the path to liberation. There should not be any cracks in the edges of the triangular corners. Whole corners can bring everlasting merit and blessing, while cracks can result in immediate punishments from deities. Leaving nail-prints on the *gtor-ma* is also forbidden, as it is believed that visible nail prints can bring serious disease. In addition, *gtor-ma* should stand straight; otherwise there is no chance of a success.<sup>76</sup> Thus, it is very important that the ritual assistants, who are responsible for preparing *gtor-ma* for the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual, are aware of all the above rules and are very careful when they are making the *gtor-ma*.

In addition, specific butter decorations are added to the *gtor-ma*, according to their purpose: two white butter triangles placed one on top of each other forming a star which flame decorations are used for wrathful deities, while white butter sun and moon decorations are used for peaceful deities.

### **3.2 *gTor-ma* for Chos-thog chen-mo**

For Chos-thog chen-mo, there are five different kinds of *gtor-ma*: *gong-gtor*, *'bul-gtor*, *bzhes-gtor*, *zlog-gtor* and other *gtor-ma*. They are made one day ahead of Chos-thog chen-mo by the ritual assistant group and placed between the thrones of the lama and the *khri-pa bla-ma*. In the following, I will describe the five different *gtor-ma* that are important to Chos-thog chen-mo.

#### **3.2.1 *Gong-gtor***

*Gong-gtor* represents the deities including the peaceful deities Kun-tu bzang-po, Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin, the tutelary deities dBal-gsas (for the fall ritual) and 'Bum-pa<sup>77</sup> (for the spring ritual), each of them with their retinues, as well as male and female protector deities. They are called '*maṇḍala*' during Chos-thog chen-mo and they should be placed on the higher altars and never lower than the eyebrows of the practitioners when they are seated. Usually, the protector deities are one step lower than the other deities.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Further information about these deities and the *gtor-ma* representing them is given in the following chapter.

### 3.2.2 'Bul-gtor

'Bul-gtor is the *gtor-ma* that is supposed to be offered to the deities, especially to the *maṇḍala* (*gong-gtor*). This includes the 'eightfold offerings' (*mchod-pa nam-brgyad*), jewel (*nor-bu*), *sman rakta gtor* and *bskang-gtor*.

The 'eightfold offerings' (*mchod-pa nam-brgyad*): form (*gzugs*), sound (*sgra*), smell (*dri*), taste (*ro*), texture (*reg-bya*), ornament (*rgyan*), *bon* (*g.yung-drung*) and treasure (*gter*) (picture 11). The form offering is represented by a *gtor-ma* on which a butter lamp is depicted, the sound offering by a *gtor-ma* on which a flat-bell is depicted, the smell offering is represented by a depiction of burning incense, the taste offering by a spherical-shaped *gtor-ma*, the texture offering by a *gtor-ma* with a piece of cloth depicted on it, the ornament offering by a *gtor-ma* on which a flower is depicted, *bon* offering by a *gtor-ma* on which a swastika turning counter-clockwise is depicted, and the treasure offering by a *gtor-ma* on which three jewels are depicted. All of them are cone-shaped and dyed red. Beautiful butter flower decorations are placed on top. These are very important offerings during the ritual and usually offered to the *maṇḍala*. They are also symbolically offered to the deities during the ritual dance by dancers representing goddesses.

The jewel *gtor-ma* (*nor-bu*) (picture 12) consists of four jewels with one jewel on top of the other three. It is dyed red and decorated with moons and suns made of butter. It is offered to the Lama Bon-brgya dge-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho and to the *maṇḍala* during the ritual.

#### *sMan rakta gtor*

*sMan* refers to wine. *rakta* literally means 'blood' and it is represented by a *gtor-ma* which is supposed to be reminiscent of a cup filled with blood, i.e. red dye (picture 13). The *gtor-ma* is a *lha-bshos*, which is cone-shaped. There are butter jewelry decorations on the top and butter moon decorations on the front (picture 14). *sMan rakta gtor* is offered to the *maṇḍala* during the invitation step of the ritual.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with bsTan-'dzin in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011. For a detailed description of this rite, see Chapter Five.

### 3.2.3 *bsKang-gtor*

*bsKang-gtor* are usually many cone shape *gtor-ma* with a bigger one in the middle. They are partially dyed in red and have a small white decoration on each top (pictures 15 and 16). They are offered as food for deities during the *bsang* in order to please the deities and in particular to repay for offenses made to the divine protectors. They are offered during ‘the ritual of dispelling’ (*zlog-pa*)<sup>79</sup>.

### 3.2.4 *bZhes-gtor*

*bZhes-gtor* is the most important offering during the feast rite and consists of the offering to the tutelary deities (*khro-tshog*) and ‘breast offering’ (*nu-tshogs*). Usually these are made as delicious as possible by using butter, cheese, sugar, and dried grapes. They are first offered to the deities, and then given to the laypeople, and the rest is offered to spirit beings. In the following I will describe the two types in detail.

*Khro* means ‘wrathful’ and *tshogs* means ‘assembly’.<sup>80</sup> *Khro-tshogs* is a offering to the tutelary deities and shaped like a sheep’s body, which has nine vertebra and four limbs. There are three different kinds of pictures on each limb (picture 17). The nine vertebrae symbolize the three realms and nine stages (*kham-gsum sa-dgu*), the twelve pictures on the limbs symbolize the twelve sense bases (*skye-mched bcu-gnyis*) and the eight consciousnesses (*rnam-shes tshogs-brgyad*).<sup>81</sup> The three realms are the saṃsāric realms of Desire, Form and Formlessness.<sup>82</sup> The nine places are the place of the hungry spirits (*yi-dags*), the place of hell (*dmyal-ba*), the place of humans, the place of the wind, the place of the gods, the place of divine mansions, the place of clouds, the place of wisdom, and the place of the unborn ultimate dimension.<sup>83</sup> The twelve sense bases are the six outer sources of perception: eye (*mig*), nose (*sna*), ear (*rna*), tongue (*lce*), body (*lus*), mind (*gid*), and the six inner sources of perception: form (*gzugs*), sound (*sgra*), smell (*dri*),

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with bsTan-pa dar rgyas in Rong-bo town, October 2011. For a detailed description of this rite, see Chapter Five.

<sup>80</sup> Karmay 2009: 191.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with bKra-shis in Khyung-po village, July, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Dung-dkar blo-bzang ’phrin-las 2001:307.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid: 2019.

taste (*ro*), texture (*reg*), and mental object (*chos*).<sup>84</sup> The eight consciousnesses (*rnam-shes tshogs-brgyad*) are: the six sense consciousnesses – that of eye (*mig*), nose (*sna*), ear (*rna*), tongue (*lce*), body (*lus*), and mind (*vid*), ego-consciousness and all-ground (*kun-gzhi*) consciousness.<sup>85</sup>

The ‘breast offering’ (*nu-sthogs*) is shaped like a female breast and decorated with a moon and a sun made of butter (picture 18). It is common in rituals of both the Buddhist and Bon traditions. It is often an important offering during the feast rite of *dākinīs*. During Chos-thog chen-mo, *Nu-tshogs* is an important offering for the feast rite of Tshe-dbang rig-’dzin which takes place on the first day. It is not offered on the second and third day.<sup>86</sup>

### 3.2.5 *Zlog-gtor*

*Zlog* literally means ‘to expel’ and *gtor* is the abridged form of *gtor-ma*. Similarly to *gong-gtor*, are the representations of deities. Usually every tutelary deity with its *zlog-gtor* retinue has its own *zlog-gtor*. For Chos-thog chen-mo, the *zlog-gtor* of dBal-gsas is made for the fall ritual, while the *zlog-gtor* of ’Bum-pa is made for the spring ritual. In order to provide a clear picture of what *zlog-gtor* is, I will describe how the *zlog-gtor* of dBal-gsas is made.

Firstly, the ritual assistants make a square container with four terraced steps. Next, the barley dough effigy that represents dBal-gsas is made. It has a triangular shape, with nine small balls, symbolizing his nine heads, on top, and a turban on top of each head. He should sit on two crossed triangular seats, placed on top each other. A *zan-ling*<sup>87</sup> facing downwards is placed under his right foot and another *zan-ling*, lying on its back, is put under the left foot. In front of him is his consort rNgam-mo yum-chen. She is black and triangular in shape. lHa-rgod ru-bzhi and Yum Srid-rgyal ru-gsum are placed on the right, while gTso-mchog ru-gsum and Yum mkha’-la gdug-mo are placed on the left. The second and third terraced steps are filled with his retinue including Srid-pa’i rgyal-mo, twenty-seven goddesses (*dbal-mo*), another eighty goddesses, ten army commanders (*dmag-dpon*), and four guardian kings (*rgyal-bo chen-po-bzhi*), eight hundred and 828 or gods. In addition, *gtor-ma*, wine, *rakta* and *lha-bshos*, the ‘eightfold offerings’ and flowers are made by placing with above deities. All of them are dyed red, except for rNgam-mo yum-

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<sup>84</sup> Dung-dkar blo-bzang ’phrin-las 2001: 259.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid: 1239.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with bsTan-’dzin in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.

<sup>87</sup> A *gtor-ma* that represents enemies, see following.



chen, and are decorated with flags depicting the tutelary deities (Appendix 2)<sup>88</sup>. Several dried branches of mustard plants are placed among them (pictures 19 and 20). They should never be put above the *maṇḍala* (*gong-gtor*) and are usually situated at the same level as the navels of the performers of the ritual, when they are seated.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.2.6 Other *gtor-ma*

Other *gtor-ma* include *gtor-ma* that are offered to the mountain gods (*yul-lha gzhi-bdag*), to formless spiritual beings (*gzugs-med-kyi sems-can*), and *gtor-ma* that represent enemies. The former two are dyed white with melted butter or left without any color, since it is said that the color red are supposed to offer only high-ranking deities.<sup>90</sup>

Since mountain gods are not high-ranking deities, offerings made to them are not dyed red. Usually they are dyed white or left with the natural color of the dough. A *gtor-ma* that is offered to mountain gods is cone-shaped and has nine layers (picture 21). It is called a ‘mountain with nine continents’ (*dkar-gtor ri-rab gling-dgu*) during Chos-thog chen-mo. Four cone-shaped *gtor-ma* are placed in the four cardinal directions, symbolizing the four kings who guard the gates. The four guardian kings are the king in the east, a white man with a lion’s head, the king in the north, red man with the head of a wild boar, the king in the west, a blue man with the head of a dragon, and the king in the south, a black man with the head of a bear.<sup>91</sup>

The *gtor-ma* that is offered to formless spiritual beings is shaped like a person with folded palms. A butter lamp made of barley dough is placed in front of it. This is called a ‘ransom’ (*thar-glud*).<sup>92</sup> It is the substitute for the *sgrub-gshen*, their friends (*mched*) and their wives (*lcam*) and family members. Thus, it represents all the *bon-gshen* and all the Bon villages in Reb-gong. It is offered to obstacle-creators, for instance demons and ghosts, in order to prevent any obstacles

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<sup>88</sup> This is my abridged translation of *dBal-gsas rṅgam-zlog gi gtor-ma'i bca'-thabs* (Method of making furious *zlog-gtor* of *dBal-gsas*) which I received from the ritual assistant groupoffering servant A-rgya-sting village, October, 2011. See also Tanpa Yungdrung, Kværne, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2006: 178-181, 285-293.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with informant bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Ron-bo town, October 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with informant bsTan-'dzin in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with informant bKra-shis, Khyung-po village, July 2011. The informant consulted his chanting scripture during the interview.

<sup>92</sup> For information about the ransom ritual see Karmay 2009: 339-379.

arising during Chos-thog chen-mo.<sup>93</sup>

The *gtor-ma* that represents enemies is called *zan-ling*. It is common in both Buddhist and Bon ritual dance. It is an effigy made of barley dough that looks like a prisoner who always lies on his or her back, and both hands are tied behind his or her back, whilst the feet are fettered with an iron chain. The hair and beard is big and black. The body is dyed red and has a big stomach, like a hungry ghost (*yi-dags*) (picture 22). It is the symbol and receptacle of enemies. The enemies here are not spontaneous enemies, ghosts, evil spirits and demons (*rang-bzhin gis grud-pa'i dgra 'dre gdon bgegs*), but rather all the cogitation (*nyon-mongs*) and disputation (*rnam-rtog*) that is caused by the five moral poisons<sup>94</sup>: (1) pride (*nga-rgyal*) originating from an inordinate sense of one's achievements, (2) love and lust (*'dod-chags*) originating from objects that fascinate the mind, (3) anger (*zhe-sdang*) as the poison of the mind which embitters everything, (4) jealousy (*phrag-dog*) which does not allow the mind to bear the sight of another's prosperity, and (5) darkness (*gti-mug*) of the mind.<sup>95</sup> One *zan-ling* is made for each day of Chos-thog chen-mo. It is believed that the five poisons are conjured into the *zan-ling* and are killed and cut each day of the ritual.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Bon-brgya dge-legs lhun-rud rgya-mtsho 2011: 241.

<sup>95</sup> Das, Sandbery and Heyde 1902: 626.

## 4. Chapter Four: IMPORTANT DEITIES AND THEIR REPRESENTATION IN CHOS-THOG CHEN-MO

Like Buddhists in Tibet, Bonpo divide the ‘enlightened’ deities into two categories: those who are peaceful (*zhi-ba*) and those whose manifestations are wrathful (*khro-bo*). In addition, adherents of Bon believe that men as well as women can attain enlightenment, and enlightened beings can manifest themselves in human form. Thus sages and lamas are believed to be divine manifestations.<sup>96</sup> The chief wrathful deities are the great tutelary deities (*yi-dam*), around whom the main rituals and meditation practices of the Tantras revolve. One or several Tantras are generally devoted to a particular *yi-dam*, and a host of attendant beings is associated with each *yi-dam*.<sup>97</sup>

Protector deities are (*bon-skyong*) also important in Bon. The main duty of protector deities is to protect the religion (*dharma*). They are also believed to protect all sentient beings from obstacles and evil forces, and to have the power to grant a happy life to all beings. They are important for rituals, because it is believed that they accompany and protect the ritual performers at all times. It is also believed that protector deities follow those who honor them like a shadow. Furthermore, it is believed that if one often gives them offerings and prays to them, they protect and take care of one like parents, they are close as one’s friends, they come whenever one asks them to come, they liberate any evil force that interferes with one’s life when they are asked to do so, and they are as quick as lighting when one asks them to come.<sup>98</sup>

All of these deities are represented in Chos-thog chen-mo as *gtor-ma* and they are very important for the rituals based on the principle of *zhi-ba’i ngang-nas khro-bo’i dbal ’bar-ba*, which means that are developed into a wrathful aspect from the deities foundation which is the peaceful aspect. Thus, the rituals usually begin by invoking one or two peaceful deities, and gradually invoke the wrathful deities.<sup>99</sup> The Chos-thog chen-mo ritual also follows this principle: on the first day it begins with the invocation of the peaceful deities Kun-tu bzang-po and Tshedbang rig-’dzin and then continues on the second day with the tutelary deities dBal-gsas rngam-

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<sup>96</sup> Kværne 1996: 24.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid: 74.

<sup>98</sup> dGe-bshes bsTan-’dzin ’brug-grags 2008: 44.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma in Khyung-po village, July 2011.

pa and 'Bum-pa. The ultimate goal of Chos-thog chen-mo is to achieve the union body of the peaceful and wrathful deities to suppress and drive out all obstacles and evil forces.<sup>100</sup> In addition, it is believed that male and female protector deities are always there to accompany the practitioners. Thus, it is important give further information about the deities and their representation as *gtor-ma* in Chos-thog chen-mo.

## 4.1 Kun-tu bzang-po

Kun-tu bzang-po, in Sanskrit Samantabhadra, 'the All-Good', is an important deity in both Buddhist and Bon traditions, especially in the Nyingma pa and bKa'-rgyud pa schools of the Buddhist tradition. In India, Samantabhadra was at the outset a bodhisattva, but in tantric Buddhism he has the status of a personification of Ultimate Reality. In Bon, Kun-tu bzang-po has the status of the *bon-sku*, which literally means 'Body of Bon', i.e. the Ultimate Reality. Moreover, he is regarded as the supreme deity in the context of meditational rituals, and he is considered to be the source of the lineage of the Aural Transmission of Zhang-zhung (*Zhang-zhung snyan-rgyud*).<sup>101</sup> This lineage is one of the three traditions of *rDzogs-chen*, 'the Great Perfection'.<sup>102</sup> Kun-tu bzang-po is portrayed as a naked enlightened being with both hands resting in his lap, in the posture of meditation. He is usually white, or occasionally blue, in color. The image of Kun-tu bzang-po is the symbol of the enlightened consciousness, i.e. consciousness without the Three Poisons: hate, greed and ignorance.<sup>103</sup>

Kun-tu bzang-po is one of the most important deities in the *maṇḍala* during Chos-thog chen-mo. His *gtor-ma* (picture 5) has a large, majestic base. It is round and symbolizes his power to discipline all beings and overcome all that appears and 'visible world' (*snang-srid*). On the base of the *gtor-ma* is a large cone, representing peaceful aspect of the deity. It is surrounded by eight narrow cones that symbolize his retinues.<sup>104</sup> The *gtor-ma* is dyed red and decorated with white sun and moon figures made of butter. There is a large decoration attached to the top of the *gtor-ma*, ornamented with colorful jewelry, flowers and flames, all made of butter.

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma in Khyung-po village, July 2011.

<sup>101</sup> Kværne 1996: 29.

<sup>102</sup> The Great Perfection is a philosophical and meditative teaching in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as in Bon (Karmay 1988: ix).

<sup>103</sup> Kværne 1996: 29. 56-57, Karmay and Watt (ed.) 2007: 214.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with bsTan-'dzin in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.



## 4.2 Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin

Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin, the 'knowledge-holder', and 'master of long life' is regarded as a manifestation of gSang-ba 'dus-pa (Concentration of Secrets) who received the tantric teaching and subdued the 'Male Arrogant Ones', compelling them to swear an oath to become protectors of Bon. Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin was the son of Dran-pa Nam-mkha',<sup>105</sup> who lived in the eighth century.<sup>106</sup> His teachings, rituals and iconographic representations are grouped in three different traditions, 'according to the tradition of Zhang-zhung (*Zhang-zhung-ma*)', 'according to the tradition of India (*rGya-gar-ma*)' and 'according to the tradition of Tibet (*Bod-yu-ma*)'.<sup>107</sup>

Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin is portrayed seated in the half-lotus posture. His body is red-brown and his hair is in a topknot. He is adorned with golden earrings<sup>108</sup> and he holds a flaming jewel in his right hand and a skull bowl in his left hand. He is depicted with his consort Nyi-ma 'od-'bar (Light-radiating Sun), who holds a chopper in her right hand and a skull bowl in her left.<sup>109</sup>

Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin is one of the most important deities in the *maṇḍala* during Chos-thog chen-mo. The base of *gtor-ma* is similar to that of Kun-tu bzang-po (picture 6). He is represented by a large cone, which is adorned with four lotus petals at its base. The front petal is adorned with the Tibetan letter *Ha* made of butter, symbolizing the ḍākinī Ha-las g.yung-drung rgod-lcam-dkar. The petal on the left is adorned with the Tibetan letter *Ri*, symbolizing Ri-las don-'grub rgod-lcam-ljang. The petal at the back is adorned with the Tibetan letter *Ni*, symbolizing Ni-las pad-ma rgod-lcam-dmar. The petal on the right is adorned with the Tibetan letter *Sa*, symbolizing Sa-las re-skong rgod-lcam-sngo.<sup>110</sup> The *gtor-ma* of Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin is dyed red. There is a large decoration attached to the top of the *gtor-ma*, similar to that on the top of Kun-tu bzang-po's *gtor-ma*.

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<sup>105</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid: 118-120.

<sup>107</sup> Kværne 1996: 120. See also Ramble 2007: 125-129.

<sup>108</sup> Ramble 2007: 127.

<sup>109</sup> Kværne 1996: 120. See also Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, Tsumagari, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2011: No.36, 248-250.

<sup>110</sup> bStan-pa dar-rgyas gave me this information from his daily prayer text (kha-'don), October 2011.

### 4.3 dBal-gsas rngam-pa

dBal-gsas rngam-pa (*rngam-pa*: ‘fierce’ *dbal-gsas*: ‘piercing deity’) is an important tutelary deity who is widely worshiped in the Bon tradition. There are three series of tantras: the outer, the inner and the secret, and the tantra of fierce dBal-gsas belongs to the inner series.<sup>111</sup> The main ritual text of this deity is entitled *dBal-gsas rngam-pa’i las-rim*<sup>112</sup>, said to have been composed by Dran-pa nam-mkha’.<sup>113</sup> It is said that Bonpos who have supreme attainment can achieve union with the body of this deity. Mu-khri btsan-po, the son of the gNya’-khri btsan-po, was one example of a practitioner who achieved the union body of dBal-gsas rngam-pa.<sup>114</sup>

dBal-gsas rngam-pa is portrayed as a typical manifestation of a tutelary deity: an awe-inspiring figure with nine fiercely distorted faces, and eighteen arms wielding weapons. He is embraced by his dark-green consort, the ‘lady of boundless space’. He stands in the characteristic pose of tutelary deities with his left leg bent and right leg stretched out, trampling the enemies of Bon under his foot. His lower three heads are (from the left) blue, red and white; the middle three are the heads of leopard, a lion and a tiger; and the top three are the heads of a makara (an aquatic monster), a garuḍa and dragon.<sup>115</sup>

In the hands held in front of him, he holds a sharply pointed dagger. His eight right hands hold (from the top): a dagger, a victorious banner of knowledge, a sword, an axe, the ensign of the created world, a spear, a military banner surmounted by a garuḍa, a fierce and all-devouring leaping tiger, and a thunderbolt. His eight left hands hold (from the top) the bow and arrow of means and wisdom, the seizing and subjugating noose, an iron hook, a chopper meat-hook, an iron chain, a *gshang*, a rat (by its hind-legs) and a great boulder. It is believed that with his weapons he seizes demons in the very center of their hearts. He vanquishes the army of demons, and kills inimical and obstructing demons. It is also believed that with his weapons he subdues the host of wisdom-gods, the inner pride of the mind of wisdom, and rescues sentient beings from

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<sup>111</sup> Snellgrove 1967: 109.

<sup>112</sup> Most Bon-gshen in Reb-gong have this text.

<sup>113</sup> Karmay 1972: 45.

<sup>114</sup> Karmay 1972: 45.

<sup>115</sup> Kværne 1996: 77-78. For other manifestations of this deity, see Tanpa Yungdrung, Kværne, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2006: 294-300. See also Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, Tsumagari, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2011: 270-272.

the pit of birth and death, and from hell.<sup>116</sup>

During the fall Chos-thog chen-mo, dBal-gsas rngam-pa is one of the most important deities in the *maṇḍala*. The base of dBal-gsas rngam-pa's *gtor-ma* (picture 7) is similar to that of the two *gtor-ma* described above. The deity himself is represented by a *gtor-ma* shaped like a pyramid with a triangular base. His nine heads are represented by small dough-flames and he is surrounded by eight other narrow triangular pyramids, representing his retinues. There is a large decoration attached to the top of the *gtor-ma*, ornamented with colorful human skulls, jewelry, flowers and flames, symbolizing his wrathful aspect.<sup>117</sup>

#### 4.4 'Bum-pa

'Bum-pa is another tutelary deity worshiped by Bonpo. The secret doctrine of this deity reached Tibet in 126a the center of the 'Ol-mo'i gling.<sup>118</sup> His cult is especially popular in the following three of the five Bon communities in Reb-gong: Khyung-po-thang, Gling-rgya bon-tshang-ma and sPyi-tshang. According to my informant Nyi-ma, the teaching and ritual of this deity only exist in Reb-gong<sup>119</sup> now. The following iconographical information is based on the statue of this deity in Khyung-po village.<sup>120</sup>

'Bum-pa is enveloped by flames and is standing in the usual posture of a fierce deity, with one leg bent and the other stretched out. His body is white and he has the wings of a horned eagle (*khyung*). He has five human skulls on the top of his head and three flaming eyes, with the third one placed vertically in the middle of his forehead. In his right hand he holds a lotus with the Tibetan letter *A* in the middle, and in his left he holds a skull bowl. He is embraced by his consort Ser-ljang gser-mdog ma, 'The one who is golden-green in color'. She holds a magic dagger in her right hand and a skull bowl in her left.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid: 78-80.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with bsTan-'dzin in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Karmay 1972: 21.

<sup>119</sup> Interview in Rong-bo Town, October 2011.

<sup>120</sup> See also Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, Tsumagari, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2011: 285-287.

## 4.5 Bon protectors

As I mentioned above, Bon protectors are very important for performing rituals. During Chos-thog chen-mo, the male and female Bon protectors are an essential part of the *maṇḍala*. Male Bon protectors are placed on the right side of the *maṇḍala* while female protectors are placed on the left side.

There are six male Bon protectors in the *maṇḍala* (picture 9): rMa-chen spom-ra<sup>121</sup>, gNam-lha,<sup>122</sup> dMu-bdud, dMu-dpon, A-bse rgyal-ba,<sup>123</sup> and rGyal-po Nyi-pang-sad<sup>124</sup>. All of them are represented by a *gtor-ma* in the shape of a triangular pyramid, which symbolizes their wrathful manifestation, on a square base. The only exception is rMa-chen spom-ra who is represented by the shape of a butter lamp with butter cones, which symbolize the snow mountain rMa-chen. All the male protectors have turbans and are dyed red. dMu-bdud has three heads and dMu-dpon has five heads, while the others each have one head. In addition, dMu-bdud and rGyal-po Nyi-pang-sad have two-layered bases that symbolize their position. gNam-lha is represented as riding his horse, which is portrayed by a horse head made of dough and placed in front of his *gtor-ma*.<sup>125</sup>

There are six female Bon protectors in the *maṇḍala* (picture 10): Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo,<sup>126</sup> Yum-sras,<sup>127</sup> sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri rong,<sup>128</sup> dBal-mo, sMan-mo<sup>129</sup> and dMar-lam gong-'og bargsum. The first four are represented by triangular *gtor-ma*, the fifth one, sMan-mo, has a cone-shaped *gtor-ma* adorned with four lotus petals, while the representation of the last one, dMar-lam

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<sup>121</sup> For a detailed description of this deity see Chapter Six.

<sup>122</sup> He is known as sKyes-bu gNam-lha. I have not found any written sources that refer to this deity. There is a picture of this deity in Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, Tsumagari, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2011: 286 (No.44-9).

<sup>123</sup> For a detailed description of these three deities see Chapter Six.

<sup>124</sup> rGyal-po Nyi-pan-sad was compelled to become a Protector of Bon by the Teacher of Bon, sNang-bzher lod-po who lived in the eighth century. He is the guardian deity of the meditational teaching, the Aural Transmission of Zhangzhung, *rDzogs-pa chen-po zhang-zhung snyan-rgyud*. He is a deity of the category styled *rgyal-po*, king. He is king of the *sgra-bla*, and *btsan*. He is portrayed as a mighty king, wearing a white robe and white turban and rides a white horse. He holds a banner of white silk (Kværne 1996: 109).

<sup>125</sup> Interview with bsTan-'dzin in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.

<sup>126</sup> For further information about this deity, see Chapter Six.

<sup>127</sup> An image can be found in Kværne 1996: 94.

<sup>128</sup> For further information about this deity, see Chapter Six.

<sup>129</sup> Her full name is sMan-Ku-ma-ra tsa and like rGyal-po Nyi-pang-sad, she was subdued by sNang-bzher lod-po to become a protector of Bon. She is the companion of rGyal-po Nyi-pang-sad. She lacks demonic traits and rides a white yak (Kværne 1996: 109-11).

*gong-'og bar-gsum*, consists of three *gtor-ma* of different heights. The first, highest one is called *dlal-gtor*. Its upper part is spherical and its lower part is triangular, which symbolizes the aspect which is between the peaceful and wrathful aspects. The second and third *gtor-ma* are triangular pyramids that symbolize the wrathful aspect. Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo, Yum-sras, sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong and dBal-mo are very similar. All of them have three heads with turbans, except for sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri rong, who has a crossed turban over her lower two heads. Of the female Bon protectors, only Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo and sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong are present in the ritual dance.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Interview with bsTan-'dzin in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.

## 5. Chapter Five: THE PERFORMANCE OF CHOS-THOG CHEN-MO

In this chapter I give an introduction to the procedures of the performance of Chos-thog chen-mo, which lasts for three days. On the whole, the procedures for each of the three days are the same, except for the ritual text that is chanted to invoke the main deity for each day<sup>131</sup>. The first day is devoted to the peaceful aspect (*zhi-ba*) of the ritual, whilst the second and third days focus on the wrathful aspect. On the first day, the *bon-gshen* chant a text devoted to Kun-tu bzang-po, entitled *sNyan-brgyud a-gsal 'phrul-gyi lde-mig ste/ kun-bzang rgyal-ba 'dus-pa'i dkyil-'khor*, the mandala of the form of Kun-tu bzang-po called *rGyal-ba 'dus-pa*,<sup>132</sup> to invoke the deity. The chanting of this text is the central element of the first day of the ritual. The fact that this day is devoted to the peaceful aspect is expressed by the character of the chanting, which is very pleasant to the ear, and by the dress of the *bon-gshen*, who do not wear their hats.

On the second day, the *bon-gshen* chant a ritual text devoted to Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin, called *Tshe-dbang gzhung-bzhi'i sgrub-pa*, The four traditions of Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin. Again, the chanting of this text is the most important part of the ritual day on. There is a short dance during the feast rite (*tshogs-'khor*) when *khro-tshogs* is cut into pieces. On the second day, the monastic disciplinarian (*dge-bskos*) reads out the 'monastic rules' (*bca'-yig*) and 'the speech addressed to the assembly' (*tshogs-gtam*). On the third day of the spring Chos-thog chen-mo, the *bon-gshen* chant a scripture devoted to 'Bum-pa, called *Yi-dam dbang-chen 'Bum-pa'i dkyil-'khor*, The *maṇḍala* of the powerful 'Bum-pa, in order to invoke the deity. In the fall ritual, a text called *dBal-gsas rngam-pa'i dkyil-'khor*, the *maṇḍala* of the fierce dBal-gsas is chanted instead. The wrathful aspect of the ritual on these two days is signified by the wrathful music that accompanies the chanting and the outfits of the *bon-gshen*, who wear different hats: a white hat depicting the wings of a garuḍa (*dkar-mo khyung-gshog*) (picture 43), a white hat depicting leftward-turning swastika (*dkar-mo rtse-rgyan*) (picture 44), a hat made from bear skin (*dom-pag*) (picture 45) and a hat with the horn of an antelope depicted on it (*gtsod-rwa*).

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<sup>131</sup> The other scriptures chanted during Chos-thog chen-mo are the same on each of the three days of the ritual, as follows: *Tshe-sgrub kyi gzungs-sngags*, *sKyabs-'gro*, *sPrul-sku Ta-pi hri-tsa'i gsol-'debs*, *rNam-mkhyen rgyal-ba gshen-rab la 'a-zha gsang-ba mdo-sdud kyis bstod-pa'i mdzad-bcu*, *sPrul-sku blo-ltan snying-po'i bsang-gzhung*, and *bsTan-srung rma-rgyal pom-ra'i bsang-mchod gong-'og gnyis* are chanted before breakfast. After breakfast the Bon-gshen chant *Sangs-rgyas sman-lha'i cho-ga*, *brgya-rtsa*, and *rGyal-yum byams-ma chen-mo'i sngags-bstod*. After lunch the Bon-gshen chant *Tshogs-'khor*, *bsKang-ba*, and in the afternoon *dBal-gsas kyi sngags*, all the *bKa'-skyong bskul-ba*, *dMar-lam zor-gyi bsgrub-pa*, *gZir-mnan bro-yi bsgrub-pa*, and *Phywa-tshe gyang-gi bsgrub-pa*.

<sup>132</sup> See Kværne 1996: 30-31, 59-61.



The ritual begins with the welcoming of the guest *bon-gshen*. The procedures of the ritual are based on the following principles: “nine basic doors for the practice of serving the deities (*bsnyen-pa'i gzhi-ma sgo-dgu*), eighteen branches for the practice of serving the deities (*sgrub-pa'i yan-lag bco-brgyad*), and nine final steps for the practice of serving the deities (*las-kyi mtha'-chen mchong-chen sde-dgu*).<sup>133</sup> However, these principles can be condensed into three stages: preliminary (*sngon-'gro*), main (*gzhung-dngos*) and final (*mjug-sgril-pa*) stages. Each stage consists of several steps. I will first describe how the guest *bon-gshen* are welcomed.

## 5.1 Welcoming the guest *bon-gshen*

On the morning of the first day, all the *bon-gshen* from the five bon communities come to the village temple where the ritual is held. They wear the outfits of *gshen* practitioners (*bsgrub-gshen*). The younger ones wear two different kinds of hats: some wear *dkar-mo khyung-gshog* hats, while others wear *dkar-mo rtse-rgyan* hats. The older *bon-gshen* (50-60 years old) wear bear-skin hats, and others wear *gtsod-rwa* hats. All of them wear cloaks with loose sleeves and two long red scarves diagonally across their chests, which indicate that they are practitioners of meditation. In addition, they bring their own ritual objects, such as a small drum (*dā'-ma-ru*) and flat-bell (*gshang*) which they use to accompany the chanting of the ritual texts.

The younger *bon-gshen* from the village where the ritual is held welcome the guest *bon-gshen* from the temple roof with musical instruments: two conch-shells, a ritual drum, a pair of cymbals (*sbug*),<sup>134</sup> two shawms (*rgya-gling*), and two great trumpets (*dung-chen*).

The *bon-gshen* make three prostrations in the front of the main assembly hall before they walk inside. Since the *bon-gshen* come from all over Reb-gong County, they arrive at different times. Nevertheless, it is important to welcome every *bon-gshen*. If the young *bon-gshen* fail to welcome all the guests, they may be punished by the older *bon-gshen*.

Inside, the main assembly hall is decorated especially for Chos-thog chen-mo. There are parasols (*gdugs*) and flags, and the pillars are adorned with colorful silks. There are two large flags on which deities depicting, one on each side of the main assembly hall. On them are

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<sup>133</sup> *sPyi-spungs khro-bo'i sa-chog bum-pa rgyan-bkod sogs lag-len gyi rim-pa mu-tig phreng-mdzes.*

<sup>134</sup> Two cymbals held one above the other and struck together vertically; used during initiations.

depicted Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo and sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo. They are believed to protect the ritual from the beginning to the end.

Around ten o'clock in the morning, all the *bon-gshen* are expected to have arrived. First they chant, make tea offerings (*ja-mchod*) and *bsang* offerings (*bsang bsngo-ba*). Once the *bsang* offerings have been made, the *bon-gshen* eat breakfast (five pieces of flat bread fried in oil,<sup>135</sup> some butter and tea with milk) and have a short break outside of the main assembly hall. Afterwards, they return to the hall and start the ritual.

## 5.2 The Preliminary stage

The preliminary stage of the ritual is based on the 'nine basic doors for the practice of serving the deities' (*bsnyen-pa'i gzhi-ma sgo-dgu*).<sup>136</sup> These nine basic doors can be condensed into four steps: purification, praising the local deities (*yul-lha gzhi-bdag*), appeasing formless the spirit beings (*gzugs-med-kyi sems-can*) and setting the guardian kings (*rgyal-bo chen-po-bzhi*) to their work.

First of all, the ritual assistants 'purification of pollution' (*mnol-bsang*)<sup>137</sup>, 'expelling poison' (*dug-phyung*)<sup>138</sup> and burning juniper to purify everyone inside the main assembly hall, the hall itself, and especially all the *gtor-ma* for the ritual.

Afterwards, the activities of making offerings to the local deities and appeasing the spirit beings begin. First, the *gtor-ma* of 'the mountain with nine continents' (*dkar-gtor ri-rab gling-dgu*) is offered to the local deities to worship them and ask their permission to hold the ritual on their territory. Then, a *gtor-ma* of 'ransom' (*thar-glud*), which represents the *bon-gshen*, their friends (*mched*), their wives (*lcam*) and family members and the laypeople of Reb-gong, is offered to the ghosts (*'dre*) and obstacle creators (*dgag*). It is believed that the ghosts and obstacle creators are

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<sup>135</sup> It is tradition of Reb-gong that five pieces of this kind of bread is considered one portion (*skal*), usually Bon-gshen receive one portion while chant master, monastic disciplinarian, *khri-pa bla-ma* and musicians receive two portions.

<sup>136</sup> The nine basic doors for the practice of approaching the yi-dam deity consist of three preliminary outer practices (*sngon-'gro phyi-yi bsnyen-pa gsum*), three inner practices (*nye-ba nang-gi bsnyen-ba gsum*) and three practices for preparing the ritual space (*bca'-gzhi las-kyi bsnyen-pa gsum*).

<sup>137</sup> A kind of incense, see also Karmay 2009: 396-405.

<sup>138</sup> *Dug-phyung*, *dug* means poison, *phyung* means removing. It is composed of different ingredients and can remove any impurity or contamination.

appeased by the offering and that any potential obstacles to the ritual are avoided. Following the offering, mustard seeds (*yungs-dkar*) are thrown in the air<sup>139</sup> in order to expel all the ghosts and other obstacle creators who could cause difficulties during the ritual.

Finally, the *gtor-ma* of the four guardian kings (*rgyal-po chen-po bzhi*) are thrown to their four respective quarters, to order them to guard the four gates from various kinds of demons: scent-Eater demons (*dri-za'i gdon*) from the east, disaster-Creator demons (*gnod-sbyin-gyi gdon*) from the north, demons of Yama (*gShin-rje'i gdon*) from the west and demons of a Nāga King (*klu-dbang-gi gdon*) from the south.

The preliminary stage lasts from morning until lunch on the first and second day, but on the third day it is finished by breakfast, because the ritual dance takes place on this day. The *bon-gshen* get up very early in the morning (4 a.m.) on this day. This main stage begins after the lunch break on the first and second day, but it starts right after breakfast on the third day. Some people say the Bonpo beat drums for *skyabs-'gro* and drink wine for breakfast, but this is not the case.

### 5.3 The main stage

The main stage of the ritual is based on the eighteen branches of the practice (*bsgrub-pa'i yan-lag bco-brgyad*), which consist of the six *maṇḍala* practices (*dkyil-'khor gzhi'i bsgrub-pa drug*)<sup>140</sup>, the six marvelous practices of the path (*ngo-mtshar lam-gyi bsgrub-pa drug*)<sup>141</sup> and the six practices of the fruit of empowerment (*'bras-bu dbang-gi bsgrub-pa drug*). However, the main stage can be condensed into three steps: 'the ritual of invitation' (*spyang-'dren*), 'the feast rite' (*tshogs-'khor*), and 'the ritual of dispelling' (*zlog-pa*).

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<sup>139</sup> Throwing mustard seeds is the symbol of establishing a boundary between lesser spiritual beings and the ritual performers. It is believed that after they have been thrown, there is no connection between the lesser spiritual beings and the ritual performers (interview with informant bKra-shis in Khyung-po village, July 2011).

<sup>140</sup> The six *maṇḍala* practices (*dkyil-'khor gzhi'i bsgrub-pa drug*) are: the practice to guard boundaries (*bar-mtshams don-gyi bsgrub-pa*), the practice of setting out *Tsa-ka li* (*tsa-ka li'i bkod-pa*), the practice of the self-liberation of the meditation mats (*rang-grol gdan*), the practice of invitation (*spyang-drangs ye-shes*), the practice of making prostrations (*phyag-'tshal mes-mdun*), and the practice of making confessions (*gcugs-dag bshags-pa'i bsgrub-pa*).

<sup>141</sup> The practice of the secret boundary of annihilating the afflictive emotions (*gsang-mtshams nyon-mongs tshar-gcod kyi bsgrub-pa*), the practice of abundant power (*byin-'bebs longs-spyod kyi bsgrub-pa*), the practice of emanating secret mantras (*'phro-'du gsang-ba 'dzab-kyi bsgrub-pa*), the practice of offering gestures and dances (*phyag-rgya bsgyur-ba gar-gyi bsgrub-pa*), the practice of body color, holding weapons, meditation mats and thrones (*sku-mdog phyag-mtshan gdan-khri'i bsgrub-pa*), and the practice of the sign of the transformed state (*gnas-'gyur rtags-kyi bsgrub-pa*).

### 5.3.1 The ritual of invitation

The ritual of invitation (*spyan-'dren*) begins with the chanting of *skyabs-'gro* and *gsol-'debs*. This is followed by the 'stage of development', which includes the chanting of 'heart-generation' (*sems-bskyed*), 'self-generation' (*bdag-bskyed*), and 'generation of the retinue of deities' (*mdun-bskyed*).<sup>142</sup> During this stage all the retinues of gods (*lha*) and divine mansions (*gzhal-yas khang*) are generated (*bskyed*) by the *bon-gshen*. Then they chant the invitation (*spyan-'dren*) and invite all the gods to the main assembly hall and especially into the *maṇḍala*. Next, the *bon-gshen* make prostrations and confessions (*gshags-pa*). After these steps, the offerings to the gods begin. First, the 'eightfold offerings' are made, in which eight different *gtor-ma* are offered to the *maṇḍala*. Then the *gtor-ma* of wine (*sman*), blood (*rakta*) and *gtor* are offered to the *maṇḍala*. The offerings are followed by the chanting of the mantra ('*dzab* or *sngags*) of the deity that is invoked on each day. Finally, the *bon-gshen* chant the praise of the mantra ('*dzab-bstod*)<sup>143</sup> and the praise of the statue (*sku-bstod*)<sup>144</sup> to end the invitation.

### 5.3.2 The feast rite

The feast, literally 'circle of offering' (*tshogs-'khor*) rite is a tantric ritual during which different kinds of food, including wine and meat, are first offered to the gods, then distributed amongst the practitioners and laypeople, and finally the remaindes are given to the ghosts (*gdon*) and obstacle creators (*bgegs*).<sup>145</sup>

For Chos-thog chen-mo, there are two main offerings: *khro-tshogs* and 'feast offerings' (*tshogs-rdzas*).<sup>146</sup> First of all, the *tshogs* and the 'feast offerings' are placed in the central row. The *bon-gshen* chant a text of purification (*sbyang-spel*) and aromatic plants are burned. It is believed that this practice cleans and empowers the *tshogs* and the feast offering. Then the *bon-gshen* chant,

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<sup>142</sup> These are scriptures that are chanted, with instructions for the visualization of the instantaneous transformation of the practitioners into the tutelary deities. (Mills 2003: 190). In 'production in oneself' (*bdag-bskyed*), the meditator imagines himself as a particular deity. In 'production in front of one' (*mdun-bskyed*), the meditator projects the deity in front of him. These productions are brought about by the deity with all its many attributes and attendants in accordance with the iconography (Stein 1972:183-184).

<sup>143</sup> A prayer in which the mantra of the deity invoked on each day is praised.

<sup>144</sup> A prayer in praise of the statue of the deity invoked on each day.

<sup>145</sup> Dung-dkar blo-bzang 'phrin-las rgya-mtsho 2002: 1751.

<sup>146</sup> The feast offering usually consists of homemade bread, a large quantity of fruit, candy, and different kinds of biscuits. For Chos-thog chen-mo, these offerings are usually provided by the *khri-pa bla-ma*, or collected from each household if there is no *khri-pa bla-ma* (pictures 75, 75).

and invite all the deities to the main assembly hall. There is a short dance at this point on the second and third day, which is directly connected to the *khro-tshogs*.<sup>147</sup>

Next, the *bon-gshen* prepare offerings to the gods and deities. Firstly, the *tshogs* is cut into three parts. The first part is placed together with the *gtor-ma* prepared for a second the ‘eightfold offering’. The second part is placed together with the jewel-shaped *gtor-ma*. The last part is mixed with more barley dough to make a *zan-ling*.

When the *tshogs* has been divided and the pieces placed correctly, the *bon-gshen* chant and offer the first part of the *tshogs*, together with the ‘eightfold offering’ and part of the feast offering to the *maṇḍala*. Next, the *bon-gshen* chant the *bskang-ba*<sup>148</sup> to make confessions, and the *tshogs-kyi dngos-grub*,<sup>149</sup> to bless the second part of the *tshogs*. Then, they put the second part of the *tshogs* together with the remaining part of the feast offering and cut them into small pieces, which are then distributed amongst the *bon-gshen*, as well as to men, women and children from the village. People believe that eating the feast offering with the second part of the *tshogs* protects against any disease.

In the next step, the *bon-gshen* conjure (*’gugs-pa*) the enemies - the five poisons - into the *zan-ling*. Next, the *zan-ling* is cut into small pieces, which symbolizes liberating the enemies. Finally, the *zan-ling* is placed together with the *zlog-gtor*.

Afterwards, the *bon-gshen* start to make offerings to the inferior guests (*’gron dman-pa’i rigs*), which are the hungry ghosts and other similar beings. These offerings are made from the leftovers of the feast offering and the second part of the *tshogs*. First of all, the *bon-gshen* dedicate (*bsngo-ba*) the leftovers and offer them to the inferior guests. Then, they wash the plate the *tshogs* was placed on, and chant. The water used to wash the plate is offered to the inferior guests. The following is my translation of the main section of the chanting that accompanies the offering to the low guests:

‘Whoever plays the role of giver of leftovers, the leftovers are given to those who desire them

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<sup>147</sup> See Chapter Six.

<sup>148</sup> Namkhai Norbu renders *bskang-ba* as ‘expiation’. Literally, it means satisfaction and refers to offering rites in repayment of offenses caused to the divine protectors. (1995: 242).

<sup>149</sup> Scripture chanted to empowers the *tshogs*.

from the four cardinal and eight intermediate directions. From the power of contemplation, the wishes of all beings are fulfilled as if nectar (*bdud-rtsi*) fell like rain'.<sup>150</sup>

### 5.3.3 The ritual of dispelling

The ritual of dispelling (*zlog-pa*) is a tantric ritual, for which a *zlog-gtor* is made. At the end of the ritual, the *zlog-gtor* is carried above people's heads and thrown down at the intersection of two roads. It is believed that all negative forces are exorcised, dispelled, and driven back by the *zlog-gtor*. Every *yi-dam* usually has its own *zlog-pa*.

For Chos-thog chen-mo, the *bon-gshen* perform *zlog-pa* for the deity dBal-gsas in the fall and for the deity 'Bum-pa in the spring. During the ritual, the *zlog-gtor* is kept inside the main assembly hall until the ritual dance takes place on the third day. After the dance is finished, *zlog-gtor* is thrown at the chosen intersection. The *zlog-pa* rite is based on the six practices of the fruit of empowerment (*'bras-bu dbang-gi bsgrub-pa drug*), one important component of the eighteen branches of the tantric practice (*bsgrub-pa'i yan-lag bco-brgyad*). During this rite, the *bon-gshen* believe that they get the blessing (*dngos-grub*) of the deity that they invoked and they promise they will never separate from the deities (*dus-gsum 'brel-med dam-bca*').<sup>151</sup>

In addition, *dmar-lam zor-kyi bsgrub-pa* and *gzir-mnan bro-yi bsgrub-pa* are very important practices that form part of the *zlog-pa* ritual. *dMar-lam zor-kyi bsgrub-pa* is a rite during which *gtor-ma* of all the male and female Bon protector deities are thrown onto the temple roof from different directions. It is believed that they expel and liberate the evil forces and obstacle creators. In addition, they will go to places where sentient beings are suffering, particularly as a result of natural disasters, in order to relieve them from their suffering. The main ritual dance takes place at this stage and a detailed description of the ritual dance is given in following chapter.

*gZir-mnan bro-yi bsgrub-pa* is directly connected to the *zlog-gtor*. *gZir* literally means to be oppressed or tormented. *mNan* is the past tense of *non* which means to suppress, subdue, overcome. *Bro* means to dance. It is a rite that takes place after the *zlog-gtor* is thrown down at

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<sup>150</sup> *lhag ma sdud pa'i las mkhan ma / lhag sdud chen mo lhag te blud / ting 'dzin sgom pa'i byin rlabs gyis / lhag ma re ba'i sems can la / phyogs bzhi mtshams brgyad steng 'og tu / lhag ma'i sbyin pa 'di gyis pas / rigs drug sems can thams cad la / dgos 'dod bdud brtsi char 'bab shog / bdud rtsi char du babs nas kyang / re ba yid bzhin bskong gyur cig/*

<sup>151</sup> Interview with bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya Monastery, October 2011.



the intersection. The *bon-gshen* bring the empty box which was used to carry the *zlog-gtor* back to the temple, turn it upside down, and dance over it. It is believed that enemies are liberated and trapped under the mountains, and that they will never be able to escape.<sup>152</sup>

## 5.4 The final stage

This final stage takes place very early in the morning of fourth day and is based on the nine practices of the final section (*las-kyi mtha'-chen mchong-dgu*). However, these nine practices can be performed in a condensed form, by chanting the following scriptures: *Phywa-tshe*, *g.Yang-blan*, *sMon-lam*, *Yig-brgya*, and *sGo-gsum dag-pa*. According to my informant bKra-shis, chanting these scriptures can eliminate negative conditions and enrich and purify the participants in Chos-thog chen-mo with positive forces. In addition, they can enhance the health, wealth, relationships and all aspects of each of the participants. Thus, according to my informants, in the final stage the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual is used to attain such goals as the destruction of the five poisons, long life, and the absence of disturbances and disease for each individual and each village in Reb-gong. The *bon-gshen* drink tea with milk after they have finished the chanting described above, and the younger *bon-gshen* go back to their homes. The older ones return home after having had a meeting, called a 'meeting of the elders' (*rgan-tshogs*).

## 5.5 Other events related to Chos-thog chen-mo

One event of lesser importance takes place after the completion of the ritual procedures on the first and second days, and two take place at the end of the ritual. The 'village invitation' (*sde-'bod*), takes place in the evenings, and 'auspicious tea' (*bkra-shis g.yang-ja*) and the meeting of the elders take place at the end.

The village invitations are a good opportunity for households in the village where the ritual is being held to invite all the *bon-gshen* to dinner. They welcome the *bon-gshen* by making *bsang* offerings, blowing conch shells and setting off firecrackers. First of all, the *bon-gshen* are asked to chant certain scriptures requested by each household. Usually, scriptures such as a 'prayer of long life' (*tshe-sgrub*), a 'prayer of wish-fulfillment' (*bsam-pa lhun-'grub-ma*), 'expiation' (*bskang-ba*) and a 'prayer of auspiciousness and prosperity' (*bkra-shis g.yang-'bod*) are chanted.

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with bKra-shis in Khyung-po village, July 2011.

Afterwards, dinner is served, usually consisting of noodle soup or rice mixed with butter, sugar and white raisins. When the *bon-gshen* are about to leave, they are given a sum of money, between 3 and 5 RMB, called alms (*'gyed*), which is both a form of payment and a virtuous act (*dge-ba*). Previously, fruit was offered as payment, but now usually only money is offered.

Auspicious tea is tea with milk that the *bon-gshen* drink on the last day when the ritual is completely finished. It is a Tibetan custom to end activities, whether mundane or religious, in an auspicious way. For instance, a wedding ceremony or a small gathering of friends usually ends with auspicious songs and dances, and religious rituals end with the chanting of auspicious scriptures and a meal. These activities are a symbol of the successful completion of the ceremony or ritual and of the aspiration to hold such activities again successfully in the future.

The meeting of elders is a meeting of the older *bon-gshen*. Sometimes A-lags bon-rgya dge-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho also joins the meeting, and the two monastic disciplinarians discuss the rules that were made for the Chos-thog chen-mo and what kind of rules should be added to the ritual. They also make clear what the expenses for Chos-thog chen-mo have been. In addition, a new *khri-pa bla-ma*, and new musicians for the next Chos-thog chen-mo are chosen at this meeting. Every two and half years, two new monastic disciplinarians and a new chanting master (*dbu-mdzad*) are selected.

## 6. Chapter Six: RITUAL DANCE

Two types of ritual dance are performed during Chos-thog chen-mo. One is the *gya-'cham*, which literally means 'the dance (that is performed between) the seating-rows (of the main assembly)'. It is performed once on the second day and twice on the third day. The other dance is the main public ritual dance that is performed on the third day of the ritual. *Gya-'cham* is very similar with the *ma-rgyud tshogs-'cham* discussed by Samten G. Karmay.<sup>153</sup> *Gya-'cham* is directly connected to the *khro-tshogs*, an offering to tutelary divinities, and is quite short and simple. All the dancers perform a short dance by walking around the courtyard and symbolically liberating the *zan-ling*, a representation of enemies. Afterwards, they bring the 'liberated' (*bsgral*) *zan-ling* to the main assembly hall and perform a short dance for the adepts who are performing the ritual. During their dance, the *khro-tshogs* is cut into pieces and offered to the tutelary divinities, while the 'liberated' *zan-ling* is put in the *zlog-pa*.

The main ritual dance takes place on the afternoon of the third day, beginning at approximately one o'clock. It usually takes place in the temple courtyard; however, it may take place on the threshing ground, if the temple courtyard is too small. This dance consists of two main parts. The first part is performed by musicians, banner-holders, and dancers, some of whom wear black hats and represent the tutelary deities (*yi-dam*). All the performers are *bon-gshen*. These performers begin by dancing once round the courtyard. The second part of the dance is performed by masked dancers, who are always laypeople, and who represent protector deities. Some of the dancers perform individually, whilst others perform in groups of two or four. There are nine groups of dancers: gShin-rje yab-yum, mChod-'bul lha-mo, bDud lha-mo, rMa-chen spom-ra, bTsan dMu-dpon, Shel-khrab-can, Bya-seng-can, gZa'-mgo-dgu, and Keng-rus.

Although the main content of the dance is the same in the five lay Bon communities and in Bon-brgya monastery, some figures are not present in all local variants of the dance. However, in order to present as complete a picture of the ritual dance as possible, I have chosen to portray every figure that is present in the dance in Bon communities in Reb-gong County, based on several fieldwork visits conducted between 2008 and 2011.

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<sup>153</sup> Karmay 2009: 191.

While there are many local variations, certain essential elements of ritual dance are common throughout Tibet, in both Buddhist and Bon traditions. I therefore first provide some general information about the most important of these common elements; i.e. the origins and purpose of the dances, and the masks and costumes used. Traditional Tibetan musical instruments are also an important common element of the dance and are the same throughout the ritual. Having already described them in the first chapter, I will not repeat this information here.

## 6.1 The origin of ritual dance

It is uncertain exactly where and when Tibetan ritual dance originated, as there are no chronicles or historical literary sources which document this. Various forms of dance developed as time passed, and with the emergence of different religious schools. Within each school, and even within each monastery, community, or village, people developed a specialized, localized dance to a particular deity.<sup>154</sup> The common feature of all these dances is that the dancers represent deities who belong to the class of protector deities (*srung-ma*). According to J.F. Rock, *srung-ma* predate Buddhism's introduction to Tibet, and have been incorporated and developed in Buddhist monasteries later.<sup>155</sup>

Several Buddhist sources refer to the origin of ritual dance. The most popular explanation, especially among the bKa'-rgyud (Followers of the Transmitted Command) and Nyingma (Adherent of the Old [Tantras]) schools, is that the tantric master Padmasambhava<sup>156</sup> performed a ritual dance to clear all obstacles and thus facilitate the building of the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, bSam-yaś.<sup>157</sup> Another important reference comes from the Tibetan sage and bridge-builder Thang-stong rgyal-po, in fifteenth century, who built the first bridge in Tibet. He suggested that Tibetans should perform a dance to attract the attention of a certain mountain demon who was thwarting the builders' efforts.<sup>158</sup> The third popular explanation traces the origin of ritual dance in Tibet to Lha-lung dPal-gyi rdo-rje,<sup>159</sup> who appeared in Lhasa in 842CE<sup>160</sup>. He

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<sup>154</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976: 65.

<sup>155</sup> Rock 1935: 806.

<sup>156</sup> Also known as Gu-ru Rin-po-che, he was a master adept of the Vajrayana, the diamond thunderbolt, or tantric path of Buddhism. He came from Uḍḍiyāna (the modern Swat region of Pakistan/Afghanistan).

<sup>157</sup> Pearlman 2002: 18.

<sup>158</sup> Jerstad 1969: 64.

<sup>159</sup> A Buddhist monk who killed king Glang-dar ma.

<sup>160</sup> Pearlman 2002: 9.

was wearing a black robe and a large black hat in order to disguise himself, when he killed king Glang dar-ma.

In addition, particular dances many originate from visionary dreams. For example, the modern dance master Namkhai Norbu choreographed a ten-day cycle of dances on the basis of dreams he had over a period of three years. He claimed that *ḍākinīs* came to him at night to make corrections if the steps did not work out properly.<sup>161</sup> Another example is the introduction of the Mongolian figure Old White Man into a dance by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama after a visionary dream he had during his exile in Mongolia.<sup>162</sup> In addition, it is said that the famous Bon Treasure Recoverer *gShen-chen klu-dga' met Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo* in his vision and introduced her dance to later generations.<sup>163</sup>

Visionary dreams are often considered to be the origin of dances in the Bon tradition. Usually religious practitioners who have achieved an advanced level of practice have a dream or a vision in which deities come to them and perform a dance. It is believed that lay people cannot have visions, thus the practitioners teach the dance to the laity, who perform it in public, so that they may see the deities the way they appear in the visions and dreams of practitioners.<sup>164</sup>

According to the Bon tradition, all protector deities represented in the dances were originally demonic beings who tried to destroy the wellbeing of sentient beings and obstruct the Bon were liberated by *sTon-pa gShen-rab* or other sages and ordered to become protectors of Bon. The founder and the sages performed dances to liberate the demonic beings. Present-day ritual dances are traditionally associated with the dances of these sages.<sup>165</sup>

The above stories show that there exist several different explanations of the origin of religious dance. In order to understand the origin of ritual dance, the facts must be assembled like a jigsaw puzzle - piecing together numerous explanations.

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<sup>161</sup> Pearlman 2002: 32.

<sup>162</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976: 65.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma in Rong-bo town, October 2011. See also Kværne 1996: 107.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma in Rong-bo town, October 2011.

<sup>165</sup> Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-gub rgya-mtsho 2011: 242.

## 6.2 Purpose of ritual dance

Ritual dances always attract big audiences. People come partly for entertainment, but mostly for religious purposes. However, the lay spectators' interpretation of the dance is often much simpler than the meaning understood by religious specialists. For instance, I was told by my grandmother that the masked dancers symbolize creatures we meet after death and thus, seeing the mask dance reduces the fear of meeting them after death. A similar explanation was given by Waddell, "... the dance is made to give the lay spectators a very realistic idea of the dreadful devils from whom the lamas deliver them, and they are familiarized with the appearance of these demons".<sup>166</sup> However, most spectators simply believe that seeing a ritual dance has the same function as an amulet in preventing sickness and misfortune.

According to religious practitioners, the dance operates on two levels – a higher and a lower level. The higher level is designed to help practitioners achieve enlightenment, while the lower level is designed to destroy evil forces and obstacles, thus liberating enemies of the community or of individuals. The impurity of the place where the dance takes place, and that of the performers and spectators, is purified through the dance.<sup>167</sup>

The following is my abbreviated translation of the overall purpose of the ritual dance according to the text *sKu gsung thugs-kyi gsang-bsgrub dbal-gsas rngam-pa'i las-rim-gyi gzhung*, 'The tutelary father and mother with all their consorts and helpers were singing the song of purified view, were dancing the dance of the purified emotional affliction, at the divine castle in the heaven, on the tracks of liberated enemies, on the mattress where the proud one fell over. The corpses of the destroyed enemies were crushed by five great things, so they suffered from the weight of the five elements. All the obstacle makers, disturbances, enemies, and hindrances are pressed down, the divinities dance to make them unable to soar and bounce up again.'<sup>168</sup> From this we can see that the divinities dance after they liberate all the obstacle makers, disturbances,

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<sup>166</sup> Jerstad 1969: 66.

<sup>167</sup> Pearlman 2002: 21.

<sup>168</sup> *mKha'-klong dbyings-kyi gsas-mkhar na/ dgra-'gegs bsgral-ba'i rjes-shul du/ dregs-pa 'gyel-pa'i gdan-steng du/ ru-bzhi lha-yi bro-chen du/ khro-chen yab-yum bro brdungs pas/ thabs dang shes-rab rab rol-bas/ pho-nya mang-po'i tshogs dang bcas/ lta-dag 'tsher ba'i glu blang cing/ nyon-mongs dag-pa'i bro brdung pa/ ye-shes dbyings-su dag-pa'i bro/phung-po bsgral-pa'i ro-thog tu/ chen-po lnga-yis nan-gyis mnan/ 'byung-ba lnga-yi brjed kyis gzir/ bar-chod log-'dren dgra dang 'gegs/ nan 'og 'di-las ma lding la/ chags 'og'd- las ma 'phar-cig ces bro brdung-ngo/*



and enemies. It may be said that the dance is a symbol of delight over the liberation of the enemies, as well as having the purpose of destroying them forever. It is said that the hearts of enemies who try to bring disaster to sentient beings and to the Teaching, split into pieces in fear when they see the dance.<sup>169</sup>

According to my informant Nyi-ma, the reason that the ritual dance is included in Chos-thog chen-mo is that religious practitioners who have attained an advanced stage of practice usually have a dream or a vision in which deities come to them and perform the dance. The ritual dance is thus performed principally for the benefit of the laity, who cannot have such visions. It is also very important for the audience to be aware that the ritual dance is not being performed for the purpose of entertainment; rather, each of the dancers represents a deity, so it is important to regard them as real deities. It is believed that seeing deities in this way can prevent misfortunes in the coming year. It is also believed that the ritual dance has a beneficial impact on mundane concerns, for instance, granting a bounteous harvest, good fortune, fame, prosperity, fertility, and general well-being. In addition, what interests me most is how ritual dance affects and expresses laypeople's faith, *dad-pa*. During the ritual dance people express their faith through a phenomenon called the 'descent of blessings' (*byin-brlab-'bab*) that occurs during the ritual dance. For further information about the 'descent of blessings', see Chapter Seven.

### 6.3 Masks

Masks are believed to literally embody the deity they represent and they are the most characteristic feature of the ritual dance. Most of them have enormous fangs and three bulging eyes, with the third eye in the middle of the forehead. Usually the nose and mouth are wide open and miniature skulls are placed on top of the hat. The highest-ranking ones have five miniature skulls<sup>170</sup> and three eyes; the lower-ranking have three miniature skulls, while masks representing local protector deities have one skull.<sup>171</sup> In some cases, a few triangular flags are attached to the helmet or diadem, which forms part of the mask.<sup>172</sup> Black yak tails are used for the masks' hair.

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<sup>169</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 242.

<sup>170</sup> Pearlman 2002: 74.

<sup>171</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976: 71.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid: 65.

Masks are usually made by the same people who make temple icons. They are made of wood, red earth, paper, brass or copper, and glue. There is cloth inside the mask, which provides padding. The dancers see through the nostrils or the mouth. All the masks must be consecrated before they are considered ready to be used, and are locked in special room, such as the *btsan-khang*<sup>173</sup> or the *mgon-khang*<sup>174</sup>. The older the mask, the more sacred it is considered to be.<sup>175</sup>

## 6.4 Costumes

The costumes for the dance are usually colorful and highly symbolic, and are mostly made of brocade and silk. In the past they were mainly made from materials that lamas received from Tibetan nobility or the Chinese imperial court.<sup>176</sup> The traditional methods of making costumes are still in widespread use.

A high-ranking dancer usually wears a gown with long, broad sleeves, similar to a Chinese imperial court dress, and a poncho-like tippet, a garment with wide sleeves that is sometimes decorated with horn-shaped embroidery or with pictures of thunderbolts or of five human heads.<sup>177</sup> Custom dictates that the costume should be made so that “the lower part of the dancing garments should move as when the great eagle soars to heaven; the locks (hair) should be shaken like the rising ‘lion with the turquoise locks’; the grace of the body should be like that of an Indian tiger stretching himself gracefully in the forest.”<sup>178</sup> In addition, the dancers wear an apron, and various bone ornaments such as bracelets and anklets. In the past, the ornaments were carved from real human bone, and might have held ashes from a cremated corpse that the dancer spread on his body.<sup>179</sup> Contemporary dancers wear pearl and ivory ornaments or have bones painted on their costumes instead. In the following section, I will describe the two main parts of the ritual dance in detail, in the order that they occur in the dance.

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<sup>173</sup> A house where mountain gods are enshrined.

<sup>174</sup> A house where Dharma protectors are enshrined.

<sup>175</sup> Pearlman 2002: 74.

<sup>176</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976: 71.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid: 72.

<sup>178</sup> Pearlman 2002: 70.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

## 6.5 The first part of the ritual dance – black hat and *bon-gshen* dancers

Black hat dancers are present in both the Bon and Buddhist traditions. According to the Bon tradition, the hats these dancers wear are the same as the hats worn by practitioners when they were in retreat, while in the Buddhist tradition they commemorate the appearance of Lha-lung dpal-gyi rdo-rje, in Lhasa in 842 CE,<sup>180</sup> when he donned a black robe and a large black hat in order to kill Glang dar-ma. However, during the ritual dance, one *bon-gshen* from each of the five main Bon communities in Reb-gong wears a black hat representing the tutelary deities 'Bum-pa and dBal-gsas rNgam-pa. All performers in this part of the dance wear two long red scarves tied diagonally across their chests. This is done because the time when the ritual takes place is considered to be *drag-po 'phrin-las*, which literally means 'cruel time'. It is believed that the performers 'liberate' (*bsgral*) demons, and the red scarves show cruelty.<sup>181</sup> Another important aspect of their costume may be explained by the fact that it used to be a Tibetan custom to decorate robes with animal skins. For instance, it was common to wear hats made of fox fur, or to put otter skin on the lower part of the robe and leopard skin over the broad sleeves. However, this custom was largely abandoned in 2006, as Tibetans became more aware of environment issues. During Chos-thog chen-mo, *bon-gshen* wear their robes with leopard skin over the broad sleeves, and this is considered a major difference between Buddhist and Bonpos. *Bon-gshen* argue that such decorations were historically symbols of status and power, and it is believed that wearing such ornaments enables them to assume the power necessary to subdue evils.<sup>182</sup> In the past, every Tibetan king was assisted by a personal priest (*sku-gshen*)<sup>183</sup>, and only he was allowed to wear a robe decorated with leopard skin. The aim of the first part of the ritual dance is to consecrate the ground upon which the dance will take place. Through this dance, all negative forces are expelled.<sup>184</sup>

Firstly, the *zlog-gtor* is brought out from the main assembly hall. Then the first group begins to dance in a circle in the courtyard. *Nor-bu 'od-'bar* describes it thus, "Some hold banners, some blow conch-shells, some beat drums, some do the circle dance and some perform the ritual

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<sup>180</sup> Pearlman 2002: 9.

<sup>181</sup> Interview with bKra-shis in Khyung-po village, July 2011.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with informant Nyima in Rong-bo town, October 2011.

<sup>183</sup> Kværne 1996: 25.

<sup>184</sup> Interview with bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya Monastery, October 2011.

dance”.<sup>185</sup> The instruments used in this part of the ritual include two conch shells, shawm (*rgya-gling*), and two great trumpets (*dung-chen*). The banners include one parasol (*gdugs*), two victory banners, and two flags depicting Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo and dBal-gsas rngam-pa. The musicians and banner holders begin walking in a circle, led by one of the monastic disciplinarians (*dge-bskos*) who holds a decorated stick topped by a carved figure depicting a dragon's head, with a bunch of burning incense sticks placed in its mouth.

The *bon-gshen* in the main assembly hall begin ringing bells and chanting. The laypeople on the temple roof make *bsang* offerings and throw ‘wind horses’, *rlung-rta*.<sup>186</sup> Bells are rung and horns are blown. After the bell-ringing and chanting has stopped, the musicians begin to beat their drums and play their cymbals. The *bon-gshen* then leave the main assembly hall and begin to dance, circling the courtyard. Besides the black hats, four other kinds of hats are used in this part of the dance: *dKar-mo khyung-gshog*, *dKar-mo rtse-rgyan*, *Dom-pag* and *gTsod-rwa*. It is said that the former two were the Bonpos' original hats, and thus wearing them brings prosperity to the Bon religion. The latter two symbolize historical events important to the Bon tradition, when during the two periods of decline in Bon – during the reigns of King Gri-gum btsan-po and King Khri-srong sde-btsan – Bonpos were not allowed to wear their original religious hats (*dKar-mo khyung-gshog* and *dKar-mo rtse-rgyan*). Thus, some practitioners wore *Dom-pag* and *gTsod-rwa* to disguise their identity as Bonpos and fled from central Tibet to Amdo and Kham. These hats are typical for the Bon communities in Reb-gong.<sup>187</sup>

After circling the courtyard once, all the *bon-gshen* are seated. Next, two skeleton dancers (*keng-rus*) put the *zan-ling* in the middle of the courtyard, and the *bon-gshen* chant.

## 6.6 The second part of the dance

The second part of the dance consists of a sequence of individual or group dances performed by dancers representing different protector deities. All the figures represented in the dance are described below. Furthermore, to give a clear picture of the sequence of the ritual dance, I

<sup>185</sup> *la la ni dar phyar ro, la la ni dung 'bud do, la la ni rnga brdung ngo, la la ni sgong rtse'o, la la ni gar bsgyur ro.*

<sup>186</sup> A small piece of square paper which was included as the pivotal element in the center of the four animals symbolizing the cardinal directions and a symbol of the idea of well-being or good fortune. It is thrown in the air. See also Karmay 2009:413-23.

<sup>187</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma in Rong-bo town, October 2011.

provide a structured observation of the ritual dance sequence as it occurred in Khyung-po village on the 7th day of first lunar month of 2010.

### 6.6.1 gShin-rje yab-yum

gShin-rje, *Yama*, ‘the Lord of Death’, the judge of souls in the afterlife and ruler of all beings, is colloquially known as *Chos-rgyal*, ‘Dharma King’. He judges all beings reborn in one of the cold or hot hells, in order to expiate the sins they committed in their previous existence.<sup>188</sup> gShin-rje Yab-yum are two dancers representing the male and female gShin-rje. Although in many cases they are identical, they sometimes wear different masks and costumes. They are present in Bon as well as Buddhist dances. They wear gowns with long broad sleeves that resemble Chinese imperial court dress, and blue, bull-headed masks. Each mask has a hat with five small skulls on top. Each skull has jewels on top, symbolizing the deities’ high rank. The first, third, and fifth jewels are blue and red, the second green and red, and the fourth is white and red. The hat has a band of green (below) and a band of red (above). The mask has two long, green horns, atop each of which is a golden flame. The face has three eyes, the third being vertical and located in the middle of the forehead. This eye has a small eyebrow, whereas the eyebrows of the other eyes are thick and prominent. The nostrils are flared. The mouth is open in a grimace showing the teeth, which are flat and cow-like. Inside the mouth, the tongue is curled up at the tip (picture 47). The female gShin-rje wears a fierce masculine mask and she has three miniature skulls (picture 48). These two are represented identically in all five Bon communities in Reb-gong, with the exception of Bon-brgya Monastery and A-rgya-sting village, where they have different representations.

gShin-rje Yab-yum’s dance is called a ‘judgment dance’ (*dge-sdug shan-’byed kyi gar-’cham*) indicating that while dancing, the deities judge right and wrong. They brandish swords in their right hands, and they hold a ‘tally board’ (*khram-shing*)<sup>189</sup> in their left. It is believed that with

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<sup>188</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 82.

<sup>189</sup> A wooden board with crossed lines. It is believed that *gShin-rje* uses this board to record the sins that all beings commit.

their swords they kill all beings who do not know right from wrong while with their *khram-shing* they record all the sins committed by all beings in the three realms.<sup>190</sup>

### 6.6.2 mChod-'bul lha-mo

mChod-'bul lha-mo literally means “the goddesses of offerings”. These deities are present in Bon as well as Buddhist dances. According to my informant A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bStan-pa dar-rgyas there were originally eight of them. Their representations are different according to the two Bon traditions: the esoteric system and the exoteric system. According to practitioners of the esoteric system, there are eight goddesses: the goddess of form, the goddess of sound, the goddess of smell, the goddess of taste, the goddess of touch, the goddess of ornament (*rgyan*), the goddess of Bon, and the goddess of treasure. Each carries a different object corresponding to their identity. The goddess of form carries a butter lamp, the goddess of sound carries a flat-bell, the goddess of smell carries incense, the goddess of taste carries a *gtor-ma*, the goddess of touch carries a piece of cloth, the goddess of ornament carries flowers, the goddess of Bon carries a *g.yung-drung*<sup>191</sup> and the goddess of treasure carries a jewel.

According to the practitioners of the exoteric system, the eight goddesses have wrathful forms called *He-shag ma brgyad*. These wrathful forms are considered to be the eight goddesses mentioned above, while the majority of believers consider them to be their own eight consciousnesses.<sup>192</sup> These are the six sense consciousnesses – that of eye (*mig*), nose (*sna*), ear (*rna*), tongue (*lce*), body (*lus*), mind (*yid*) – as well as the ego consciousness (*nyon-jid yid-kyi rnam-shes*), and the all-ground consciousness (*kun-gzhi'i rnam-shes*).<sup>193</sup>

In contemporary Bon ritual dances in Reb-gong, usually only two, though sometimes four, mChod-'bul lha-mo are represented. Their masks look just like children's faces, with large ears and eyes, and a small mouth with beautiful lips (picture 49). The mask is topped by a red hat with a black trim. There are five multicolored jewels on top of the hat. The dancers are usually boys

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<sup>190</sup> Interview with informants A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-ba dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya Monastery, October 2011.

<sup>191</sup> It is the left-bent swastika and it is the primary symbol of Bon religion. Bon religion is usually called *g.Yung-drung bon*, in English it means the religion of ‘Everlasting Truth’ (Watt 2007: 22).

<sup>192</sup> Interview with informants A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-ba dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya Monastery, October, 2011.

<sup>193</sup> Dung-dkar Blo-bzang 'phrin-las 2002: 1238.



aged between ten and thirteen, dressed in colorful skirts and silk jackets. Each of them carries a flat-bell in his right hand and a rosary in his left.

### 6.6.3 bDud lHa-mo

This dance is performed by dancers representing two deities. The lHa-mo referred to in the name of the dance is Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo (Queen of the Created World) and bDud is dMu-bdud 'byams. Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo is also called dByings ye-shes kyi lha-mo (Goddess of the Hexagram Wisdom). She is the most important Bon protector<sup>194</sup>. In her most common manifestation, she rides a black or red mule and has three faces and six arms. The face to the right is white and smiling, the face to the left is red and fierce, and the one in the center is bluish-black and wrathful.<sup>195</sup>

My informant Nyi-ma told me that Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo is the wrathful manifestation of Byams-ma, 'the Loving Lady'.<sup>196</sup> She is frequently called Shes-rab byams-ma, 'the Loving Lady of Wisdom'. Like the Buddhist female bodhisattva Tārā, she can assume a five-fold form or appear in eight-fold forms, each form banishing the fear of a particular danger. She is yellow and her throne is supported by lions. She holds a golden vase in her right hand and a mirror in her left.<sup>197</sup>

bDud is dMu-bdud 'byams, an important male Bon protector, who promised sTon-pa gShen-rab that he would protect the Bon religion. He is viewed as the most faithful one among the Bon protectors. The other protectors are believed to protect anyone who makes offerings to them, regardless of their religion, but dMu-bdud-'byams is the only one who exclusively protects Bon adherents, even if others make offerings to him. Thus, a *gtor-ma* is offered to him as a special reward in every Bon ritual in Reb-gong today.<sup>198</sup>

Both of these dancers are dressed in long black robes. Their masks are very similar: bluish-black, with three eyes, and noses wrinkled wrathfully (pictures 50 and 51). Each mask is topped

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<sup>194</sup> Interview with bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya Monastery, October 2011.

<sup>195</sup> Kværne 1996: 107. See also Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, Tsumagari, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2011: 301-305.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma in Rong-bo town, October 2011

<sup>197</sup> Kværne 1996: 28.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma in Rong-bo town, October 2011. See also Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, Tsumagari, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2011: 260 (No. 38-13)

by a headdress with five small skulls, representing the deities' rank. Their mouths are wide open, showing their large flat teeth and four fangs. The tongue is curled up towards the palate as if making a clicking sound. They have golden beards and eyebrows.

It is believed that during the dance, Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo emanates one hundred heads and one thousand hands in order to guide all beings from the three realms of existence to the right path. Moreover, she emanates as goddesses of peace (*zhi*)<sup>199</sup>, prosperity (*rgyas*)<sup>200</sup>, control (*bdang*)<sup>201</sup>, and wrath (*drag*)<sup>202</sup>, and as six goddesses of the six seasons. Each is related to a particular time of day and is characterized by a particular color. With the sword in her right hand she is said to liberate the enemies that bring disaster to all beings.<sup>203</sup> It is said that gShen-chen klu-dga' had a vision of the dance of Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo, and the rhythm of the drum is said to resemble the sound of the footsteps of her mule.<sup>204</sup> dMu-bdud 'byams wields a chopper in his right hand, and with the furious movements of his dance, is believed to liberate all enemies and bring happiness to all beings, especially those who believe in and practice Bon.<sup>205</sup>

#### 6.6.4 sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong

sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo is colloquially known as Nag-mo, 'The Black Female'. *sGra-bla* could be an earlier spelling than the now more familiar *dgra-lha*.<sup>206</sup> dGra-lha are the deities who are capable of protecting their worshipers against enemies and helping them to achieve a higher rank and social status.<sup>207</sup> According to Samten G. Karmay many scholars consider the word *sgra-bla* to be a misspelling. He however maintain that the word *sgra-bla* does not pose a problem, but rather that in ancient Tibetan belief the soul was a kind of god.<sup>208</sup> My informant bsTan-pa dar-rgyas says that people cannot make any sound if they do not have a soul, so sGra-bla' rgyal-mo is the deity of the soul. Here, I would like to describe the *sgra-bla* according to *The Nine Ways of Bon*<sup>209</sup>,

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<sup>199</sup> *Zhi* literally means 'peace'. Here it refers to the peace that results from the destruction of demons and evil spirits.

<sup>200</sup> *rGyas* literally means 'to prosper'. Here it refers to long life, merit and wealth.

<sup>201</sup> *dBang* literally means 'to control'. Here it refers to control over human and non-human beings.

<sup>202</sup> *Drag* literally means wrathful. Here it refers to wrathfully cutting the enemy into pieces.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Nyi-ma A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

<sup>206</sup> Snellgrove 1967: 258.

<sup>207</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 318.

<sup>208</sup> Snellgrove 1967: 158.

<sup>209</sup> Excerpted from a work entitled '*Dus-pa rin-po che dri-ma med-pa gzi-brjed rab-tu 'bar-ba'i mdo*', referred to

edited and translated by David L. Snellgrove. He translated *sgra-bla* as ‘genies’. There are two main genies according to Snellgrove. One group is the *ye-mkhyen* genies, and the clairvoyance of these divinities is the basis of one the four kinds of sortilege (*mo*), i.e one of four subjects of the ‘Way of the gShen of Prediction’ (*phywa-gshen theg-pa*). Another one is the *wer-ma* genies, which is one part of the ‘Portal of Exorcism’ (*chab-nag chu-bo sel-gyi sgo*), which is one of the four categories in the ‘gShen of the Visual World’ (*snang-gshen theg-pa*). There are four kinds of *wer-ma* genies: the genie-furies (*gnyan*), the *wer-ma* lords, the *cang-seng* furies and *shug-mgon* leaders. One must make offerings to the *wer-ma* genies when living beings are tormented and troubled by the afflictions of suffering, impediments, jealousies, when the spread of the doctrine diminishes and enemies rise up, when well-being and influence are in decline and battle comes.<sup>210</sup> In addition, according to the text *dBal-gsas rngam-pa’i las-rim gyi mngon-rtogs gsal-byed nyi-ma’i dkyil-’khor*<sup>211</sup>, sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong has three heads: the middle one is the head of a hawk (*skyung-ka*), the right one is the head of a bear and the left one the head of a rhinoceros (*bse-ru*)<sup>212</sup>.

sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo’s cult is extremely popular in Reb-gong; most Bonpos in this area know her ‘expiation’ (*bskang-ba*) and recite it daily. A popular story relates the origin of dance. A long time ago, an excellent *bon-gshen* from rGyal-bo ngo-mo village had a dream in which sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong revealed her dance to him. The next morning, the *bon-gshen* remembered the performance perfectly and could dance every step. The Bon adherents of this village have maintained this tradition of performance down to the present day. There is also an oral account of the deity’s origin. She is said to have been a layperson who married a man who later died. She then married another eight men, each of whom died in succession. She was thus widowed nine times, which caused her a lot of suffering and pain. Everyone in her village looked down on her. Eventually she also died, and it is believed that she then became a demon who always brought misfortune to sentient beings. Later, sTon-pa gshen-rab subdued her and ordered her to become a protector of Bon.<sup>213</sup>

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simply as *gZi-brjed*. It is a long version of gShen-rab mi-bo che’s biography in twelve volumes (Snellgrove 1967: 3).

<sup>210</sup> Snellgrove 1967: 56-66.

<sup>211</sup> Very important chanting text for Chos-thog chen-mo, most Bon-gshen in Reb-gong have this text.

<sup>212</sup> Interview with bKra-shis in Khyung-po village October 2011.

<sup>213</sup> Interview with informant Nyi-ma in A-rgya-sting village, October 2011.

sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo's mask is black and resembles an angry man's face (picture 52). It has three large eyes, the third of which is vertical and located in the center of the forehead. The nostrils, rims of the eyes, and lips are red. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo's nostrils are flared and her mouth is wide open. Her mouth is crowded with flat teeth and four prominent fangs. Her chin is covered with a short, golden beard, and golden eyebrows flare above the two bulging eyes. She wears a headdress with five small skulls and her hair hangs wild and disheveled over her face. She holds a sword in her right hand and wears a long black robe, on which many white skulls and bone ornaments are painted.

sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo's dance is the most furious of all the deities' dances. While dancing, she constantly brandishes her sword. Her movements are typically rapid and erratic, compared to the slow, fluid movements of other deities. She runs to and fro, and then collapses onto the ground, her back arched, sweeping her sword in an arc above her head. The music that accompanies her dance is more intense than during the rest of performance.

#### **6.6.5 The mountain god rMa-chen spom-ra**

The mountain god rMa-chen spom-ra is the personification of a mountain range lying in the south-east of rMa-chen County, in mGo-log<sup>214</sup> Prefecture in Qinghai Province. He is known to the locals as A-mye rMa-chen (Grandfather rMa-chen). One way of venerating this mountain god is to circumambulate the mountain.<sup>215</sup> He is worshiped in both Buddhism and Bon. Bonpo call him rMa-gnyan sPom-ra and represent him as a white man holding a lance, riding a lion or horse with a turquoise mane<sup>216</sup>. Bonpos in Reb-gong write his name as rMa-chen spom-ra and often abbreviate it to rMa-rgyal.<sup>217</sup>

My informant A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas told me that gShen-lha 'od-dkar emanated as rMa-chen spom-ra in order to protect the disciples of Bon. gShen-lha 'od-dkar is an important peaceful deity in the Bon pantheon. *gShen-lha* can be translated as 'the God of the Priest', or as 'the God who is a Priest', 'od-dkar signifies 'white light'. He has a white

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<sup>214</sup> mGo-log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture is in the southeast of Qinghai Province.

<sup>215</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 210.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid. See also Bon brgya dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, Tsumagari, Tachikawa, and Nagano (eds.) 2011: 260 (No. 40-19).

<sup>217</sup> Interview with informant bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011

body and “in order to rescue sentient beings from the morass of birth-and-death, he grasps the hook of Compassion”<sup>218</sup> with his right hand. His throne is supported by elephants.

The mask of rMa-chen spom-ra depicts a white, shiny man’s face, and this could symbolize *gShen-lha*, as *’od-dkar* signifies ‘white light’. Moreover, it could represent the snow-capped mountain on which he dwells. His face appears less furious than that of other deities and in addition to his very white skin; he has a black beard and eyebrows. He also has three eyes, with the third in the middle of his forehead. His mouth is closed and lips drawn and he has a mole on his chin (picture 53). rMa-chen spom-ra wears a red helmet with black edges three multicolored jewels on the front. There are flags atop the helmet. He wears a long robe and holds a lance in his right hand. It is believed that during the dance he creates countless emanations in order to give all sentient beings blessings and a happy life.<sup>219</sup>

#### 6.6.6 A-bse rgyal-ba

A-bse rgyal-ba is one of the major protectors of the class of *btsan*, which are ancient Tibetan deities believed to be fierce, aggressive beings. They are portrayed as mounted warriors clad in armor and holding weapons, and their characteristic color is red.<sup>220</sup> *bTsan* are traditionally considered to have originally been demons that lived in a castle made of cherry-brown leather with door-bolts made of copper. The castle was believed to be located on a red plain of copper, where copper rocks reached up to the sky and cherry-brown vultures floated in the air. *bTsan* demons roamed over the surface of the earth. Animals gathered in the center of their castle and poisonous snakes writhed below. Inside the rocks and mountains, a sea of blood boiled.<sup>221</sup> A-bse rgyal-ba is styled as a ‘cliff-*btsan*’, *brag-btsan*, or ‘King of the *bTsan*’. He is said to dwell on the ledge of a cliff to the north-east of Mount Kailash, on the border between Mon, Nepal, and Tibet.<sup>222</sup>

The mask of A-bse rgyal-ba looks like a fat, angry man’s face. It has three eyes, with the third in the middle of the forehead. The skin is red and the nose is very large. He bares his large flat teeth,

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<sup>218</sup> Kværne 1996: 25.

<sup>219</sup> Interview with A-lags Nam-mkha’ bstan-’dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

<sup>220</sup> Kværne 1996: 111.

<sup>221</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 171-172.

<sup>222</sup> Kværne 1996: 111.

with the two fangs in the upper jaw jutting over the bottom lip. He has a golden beard and eyebrows and wears a golden helmet topped with flags and pheasant feathers (picture 54).

The dancer portraying this deity wears a long robe with a richly embroidered blue apron, and holds a lance in his right hand. He dances furiously with gestures that represent shooting endless arrows like rain. This causes the souls of enemies to be separated from their bodies, and they are thus liberated. Their flesh, blood and skin are offered to the deities to accomplish the ‘three completes’ (*tshang-ba gsum*). The ‘three completes’ are: firstly, to fulfill the wish of the *bon-gshen* by liberating their enemies, secondly to fulfill the wish of the goddesses by offering the flesh and blood of enemies to them, and finally to fulfill the wish of the enemies by expelling their souls forever so that they never can return.<sup>223</sup>

#### 6.6.7 bTsan dMu-dpon

This performance involves two deities: *bTsan* refers to the brag-btsan and *dmu-dpon* refers to deity bTsan-rgod hur-ba. Brag-btsan was born from a copper egg that resulted from the union of A-bse rgyal-ba and Sa-srin ma-mo. He is a red-colored man with flaming hair, bloodshot eyes, and teeth of conch-shell. He wears a helmet and a voluminous cloak of red silk. sTon-pa gShen-rab bound the Brag-btsan demon with an oath and appointed him to the position of Bon Protector.<sup>224</sup> My informants A-lags Nam-mkha’ bstan-’dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas told me that bTsan-rgod-hur-ba was an important protector deity of Bon during the first propagation of the Doctrine (*bstan-pa snga-dar*). During the ritual dance, Brag-btsan wears a mask and robe identical to that of A-bse rgyal-ba (picture 55) while dMu-bdud wears a dark brown mask (picture 56). They are present in the dance in order to guide to all the oath-bound protector deities. They use their swords and dance the everlasting *g.yung-drung* dance (*mi-’gyur g.yung-drung-gi gar-chen*) as an auspicious sign that the Bon religion will prosper again and create happiness for all sentient beings.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Interview with A-lags Nam-mkha’ bstan-’dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

<sup>224</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 252.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with informant A-lags Nam-mkha’ bstan-’dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

### 6.6.8 Shel-khrab-can

Shel-khrab-can (The One who Wears Crystal Armor) is known to local people as *rGyal-po* (The King). He wears a mask with yellow skin (picture 57). His dance is unique. He first makes nine circles in a counter-clockwise direction, and then another nine in a clockwise direction. He begins by moving slowly and increases his speed with each circle. My informants A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas stated that he dances like a violent storm that has nine circles, in order to separate the soul (*bla*), mind (*gid*), and heart (*sems*) of all enemies, and to imprison them in a dark prison.<sup>226</sup> In addition, they said that the appearance of this deity proclaims the Bon doctrine, which contains the truth of interdependence of cause and effect, and also plants the seed of Enlightenment in all sentient beings, so that they can attain happiness through Bon.

### 6.6.9 Bya-seng-can

This performance involves two deities. One has the head of a jackdaw (*skyung*) and the other has the head of a snow lion (picture 58). They are not present in all five Bon communities in Reb-gong, only in Bon-brgya Monastery and Gling-rgya bon-tshang-ma village. They wear gowns with long, broad sleeves and hold magic daggers in their hands (picture 58). It is said that their dance is as furious as lighting, in order to extinguish enemies and protect deities, and to give all enemies to butchers, who eliminate them immediately and bring happiness to all sentient beings.<sup>227</sup>

### 6.6.10 gZa' mgo-dgu

The *gZa'* with nine heads dance is only performed in Gling-rgya bon-tshang-ma, and involves two identical deities. According to my informant bsTan-pa dar-rgyas, it also present in the ritual dance of the Nyingma and Gelug traditions. *gZa'-mgo-dgu* is said to be a demon with nine heads, with a snake's body from the waist down. All of this deity's nine faces are green and each has five miniature skulls on top. The nine heads are topped by a hawk's head (picture 59). Each mask bares large teeth and four fangs in its gaping mouth, and the tongue is curled upwards. The

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<sup>226</sup> They also explained to me that the human soul is like the light of a butter lamp, the mind is like the wick of the lamp, and the heart is like the butter of the lamp.

<sup>227</sup> Interview with informant A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

dancers wear long Tibetan robes and have a large rosary around their necks. They brandish a bow in their left hand and an arrow in their right. It is believed that during the dance their arrows fall like rain upon enemies.<sup>228</sup>

#### 6.6.11 Skeletons

According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz, there are two classes of skeleton (*keng-rus*) dancers. They are the ‘masters of the cemetery’ or ‘protectors of the cemetery’. The first wear a human skull mask with either five or three miniature skulls, or a pair of rainbow-colored fans attached at the height of the ears. These have the highest rank. The second class also wear a human skull mask, but without the miniature skulls and rainbow-colored fans.<sup>229</sup> The skeleton dancers are called *keng-rus* in the Bon community in Reb-gong, and wear a human skull mask with rainbow-colored fans, but without miniature skulls. As the rank of the deities in ritual dance is indicated by the number of miniature skulls (picture 60), I believe that the *keng-rus* in Reb-gong belong to the second class.

They wear a white, skin-tight costume with white gloves and white shoes. Sky-blue silk and orange and red pieces of material are stitched on to the edges of their trousers, sleeves and jackets. They play the part of the servants of gShin-rje and sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo in the dance. A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'zdin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas told me that they offer the flesh, blood, and bones of the liberated enemies to the Protector Deities.

### 6.7 Finale

After the individual performances, all the male and female protector deities, led by Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo and dMu-bdud 'byams, perform a furious dance meant to resemble a burning fire. Firstly gShin-rje, then other dancers, cut the *zan-ling* into pieces and put it in the *zlog-gtor*. After this, all the dancers and *bon-gshen* together carry the *zlog-gtor* to an intersection and burn it there. This symbolizes that the enemies of the Bon religion from the three realms have been cut into pieces and their flesh, bones, and blood offered to the protector deities and their soul burned,

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<sup>228</sup> Interview with informant A-lags Nam-mkha' bstan-'dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

<sup>229</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976: 78.



never to return.<sup>230</sup> All the *bon-gshen* and dancers perform a short dance in the courtyard when they return, symbolizing their joy because all the enemies have been expelled and killed. They shout ‘*lha rgyal-lo*’, ‘the deities have won’ and the dance is considered to have been successful.

## 6.8 The sequence of the ritual dance in Khyung-po village on 7<sup>th</sup> first lunar month, 2010.<sup>231</sup>

Time ( local time: 13:30 pm)	Activities
00:00	<i>Zlog-gtor</i> brought out.
00:07	Parasol, victory banners, and flag depicting the tutelary deities ( <i>yi-dam</i> ) brought out.
00:10	Two black-hat dancers, each brandishing a long (antelope) horn in their right hand.
00:12	Two black-hat dancers with green helmets and orange crown ornaments.
00:14	Two great trumpets ( <i>dung-chen</i> ) brought out.
00:16	Four bear-hat <i>bon-gshen</i> come out from the main assembly hall. Two trumpet blowers have begun to circle, drums remain at door.
00:17	Music stops. <i>Bon-gshen</i> begin bell-ringing and chanting inside

<sup>230</sup> Interview with A-lags Nam-mkha’ bstan-’dzin and bsTan-pa dar-rgyas in Bon-brgya monastery, October 2011.

<sup>231</sup> Layout of ritual dance in this village see Appendix 3.

	the main temple.
00:19	Men on the roof make <i>bsang</i> offerings. They throw ‘wind horses’ in the air.
00:21	Bells ring, horns blow, thereafter, drums and cymbals start. Banner-holders begin circling, led by the monastic disciplinarian.
00:23	Firecrackers, <i>bsang</i> offerings continue.
00:25	Offerings continue and the banner-holders continue circling.
00:29	Offerings finish, men prostrate on the roof as they finish. The <i>bon-gshen</i> circle come out of the main assembly hall and go back to sit in front of it, on the porch.
00:40	All <i>bon-gshen</i> are seated, musicians go to the front of the main assembly hall led by five cymbals. Seated <i>bon-gshen</i> begin rattle-shaking ( <i>thun-ra</i> ).
00:44	Two <i>keng-rus</i> bring the <i>zan-ling</i> to the centre, and then leave through the main entrance of the village temple.
00:46	<i>Keng-rus</i> return, and leap facing each other, south of the table on which <i>zlog-gtor</i> is put.
00:48	They stop, then leave through the gate whilst facing temple (i.e., walking backwards).

00:50	Two mChod-'bul lha-mo enter with bells, and circle the table
00:54	mChod-'bul lha-mo exit. One gShin-rje enters.
00:56	At the gate, the other gShin-rje enters and begins circling counter-clockwise. Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo, bTsan dMu-dpon, A-bse rgyal-ba and the rMa-chen spom-ra also enter. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong enters, rushes to the shrine ( <i>btsan-khang</i> ) and prostrates, then joins the dance.
00:58	Shel-khrab-can, two <i>keng-rus</i> , and two <i>mhhod-'bul lha-mo</i> enter. All circle counter-clockwise.
01:00	gShin-rje complete one circle and spiral inwards towards the centre where the table is located.
01:01	Music stops. Khata are presented to gShin-rje. They are tied onto their horns, and tucked into the back of their robes.
01:03	Cymbals begin, followed by drums. Circling resumes. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong rushes at the <i>zan-ling</i> several times.
01:06	Music stops, dancers' swords are collected, then circling resumes.
01:08	gShin-rje exit, sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo visits the <i>btsan-khang</i> while all other dancers leave.

01:10	bTsan dMu-dpon re-enter holding a spear. They circle counter-clockwise. Cymbal, drum, and great trumpet play.
01:11	The bTsan dMu-dpon stop circling and dance in place on either side of the table.
01:15	One <i>bon-gshen</i> attempts to disarm the bTsan but he refuses to give up his spear.
01:18	bTsan dMu-dpon are disarmed, begin circling counter-clockwise, and then exit.
01:19	A-bse rgyal-ba enter. Circle counter-clockwise, then stop on either side of the table.
01:21	A-bse rgyal-ba disarmed after brandishing sword.
01:22	A-bse rgyal-ba exits.
01:23	Shel-khrab-can enters, circles clockwise. Stands on eastern side of table.
01:26	Music stops. Men present khata to Shel-khrab-can which they tuck in at the back of his robe. Some make prostrations to Shel-khrab-can.
01:28	Music resumes. Shel-khrab-can resumes dancing.

01:30	Shel-khrab-can is disarmed, and then exits.
01:31	Drummer, cymbals move to north-west corner of the courtyard. The conch shell is blown from the roof above the courtyard gate. Great trumpet, shawm, drum and cymbal are played. Firecrackers are set off on the roof. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong enters, a low bench is covered with felt. Wind horses are thrown from the roof. sGra-bla' rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong sits on bench. Numerous men offer khata. Some people prostrate to sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri rong. <i>Keng-rus</i> are at either side of the bench.
01:36	Noise of firecrackers, calling the name of 'sTag-ri-rong' and noise of shawm, great trumpet, drums and cymbals continue. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong has many khatas on her lap.
01:37	The noise of firecrackers subsides. <i>Keng-rus</i> kneel by the bench as if to lift it.
01:38	sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong begins to dance whilst still seated on the bench. <i>Bon-gshen</i> begin chanting.
01:39	sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong gets up from the bench and begins dancing in the north-west corner of the temple courtyard. Firecrackers resume.
01:41	Music and dance pause briefly.

01:45	Music resumes. sGra-bla' rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong dances.
01:47	Music and dance pause briefly. Then music and dance resume.
01:50	Music and dance pause briefly. Then music and dance resume.
01:53	Pause again. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong is disarmed. She dances again briefly, then exits.
01:57	<i>Zan-ling</i> is taken from under the table. Bells, shawm, great trumpet, and drums play.
02:10	All fourteen dancers re-enter, led by gShin-rje. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong threatens the <i>zan-ling</i> . Five <i>bon-gshen</i> enter the circle of dancers and stand there.
02:13	Music stops. All <i>bon-gshen</i> chant. <i>Zlog-gtor</i> is partly dismantled by one <i>bon-gshen</i> . gShin-rje moves in and out of the circle, moved head from side to side.
02:20	Music and chanting ends. White paper is burned and placed on the <i>zlog-gtor</i> . All dancers leap forward simultaneously. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong circles and gShin-rje goes in and out.
02:21	gShin-rje cuts up the <i>zan-ling</i> with his sword and then other dancers do the same.
02:22	All <i>bon-gshen</i> , dancers, and some members of the audience exit. They go to a crossroads behind the village and discard the

	<p><i>zlog-gtor</i>. Two men from ritual assistants group hold the <i>zlog-gtor</i> and people go under it. All except some men from the village go home.</p>
02:56	<p>After <i>bon-gshen</i> and dancers come back from the crossroads, they perform a short dance in the courtyard; they step on the container of the <i>zlog-gtor</i> that is placed upside down, symbolizing their joy, because all enemies have been expelled and killed. They shout ‘<i>lha-rgyal-lo</i>’.</p>

## 7. Chapter Seven: THE ‘DESCENT OF BLESSINGS’

In this chapter I will discuss the ‘descent of blessings’ (*byin-rlabs-’beb*) that occurs during the ritual dance. Before going into the details of this phenomenon, I would like to describe other forms of trance in Tibetan religious culture that are similar to the ‘descent of blessings’. First of all, we need to define the term trance.

### 7.1 Defining the term ‘trance’

Many Tibetans have the impression that trance is a phenomenon that only occurs in the Tibetan cultural sphere, an impression I shared until recently. When foreign tourists ask questions like ‘Why does this happen?’ Tibetans try to answer on the basis of their own understanding. Tibetans never ask ‘Does this happen in your society?’ and if so, ‘How do you explain this?’. However, secondary literature has proved to me that this phenomenon is widespread, and is interpreted differently in different cultures. The explanations can be either mystical or non-mystical. Spirit possession and soul-loss, which represent privileged channels of communication between man and the supernatural, are the two principal mystical explanations.<sup>232</sup> Most psychiatrists and psychoanalysts study the nervous system and some of them use “therapies that provoke trance and trance-like states in which the patient is liberated by drugs and hypnosis from his customary restraints and is free to disgorge repressed traumatic experiences through abreaction”.<sup>233</sup> From a non-mystical perspective, trance can be explained in terms of loss of personal vital force and the intrusion of an external power, accompanied by complete or partial mental dissociation, and often exciting visions.<sup>234</sup> My position here is not to argue for any particular explanation, but rather to provide empirical data about the trance phenomenon that occurs during the ritual dance. Firstly, I will examine how trance in Tibetan culture is defined by scholars.

Trance is a condition where a non-human being is believed to enter a human body and partially or fully take over the person’s personality, an altered state of consciousness interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit.<sup>235</sup> During the trance, local deities can be contacted, generally

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<sup>232</sup> Lewis 1971: 64.

<sup>233</sup> Lewis 1971: 40.

<sup>234</sup> Lewis 1971: 30.

<sup>235</sup> Havnevik 2002: 259.



by means of the ordinary conscious personality of the medium being temporarily replaced by that of local deities.<sup>236</sup> During the trance, the human ego is blotted out, and the medium's body is used as a support for the deity who fills him or her and speaks through his or her mouth.<sup>237</sup> The trance as such is described by terms such as *lha-'bab*, the descent of a god, or *lha bzhugs-pa*, which define the god as residing within the oracle or descending into him or her.<sup>238</sup>

As we can see, most scholars agree that trance is characterized by altered states of consciousness. It is therefore reasonable to say that trance is an altered state of consciousness, different from the consciousness of day-to-day life, which is believed to be replaced by the consciousness of a deity, spirit or supernatural power.

## 7.2 Altered states of consciousness in Tibetan religious culture

In Tibetan religious culture people enter various altered states of consciousness. Those who experience altered states of consciousness are known as oracles or 'spirit-mediums' (*sku-brten*, *chos-rje*, *lha-pa*), 'revenants' (*'das-log*), 'gesar bards'<sup>239</sup> (*sgrung-mkhan*), or 'finders of hidden treasure' (*gter-bton*)<sup>240</sup>. Men and women who are chosen by a god often fall seriously ill or experience a series of visions. A lama or experienced spirit-medium discovers them and later they are trained by an experienced spirit-medium.<sup>241</sup> In addition, there is an altered mode of consciousness experienced by people who are believed to be possessed by spirits of the deceased. In the next section I shall briefly describe each of these categories of people who experience altered states of consciousness.

## 7.3 Oracles or spirit mediums

The terms *sku-brten*, *chos-rje*, and *lha-pa* are used interchangeably in Tibetan, and here I use the English terms *oracle* and *spirit medium* as synonyms. The body of an oracle is often used as a support for deities. They are believed to become possessed by 'worldly' protector deities (*'jig-*

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<sup>236</sup> Samuel 1993: 291.

<sup>237</sup> Stein 1972:187-188.

<sup>238</sup> Diemberger 2005:136.

<sup>239</sup> Gifted people who sing versions of the Tibetan epic Gesar according to their visionary experiences.

<sup>240</sup> Gifted people who find treasure through their visionary experiences.

<sup>241</sup> Samuel 1993: 291.

*rtan pa'i srung-ma*).<sup>242</sup> The highest-ranking oracles are known as masters of religion (*chos-rje*), and the State Oracle is commonly known as gNas-chung chos-rje.<sup>243</sup> A ‘worldly’ oracle who is possessed by a local mountain deity or spirit is known as a ‘god-person’ (*lha-pa*), ‘god-mouth’ (*lha-kha*), ‘hero’ (*dpa'-bo*) or a *ḍākinī*.<sup>244</sup> They are supposed to become mouthpieces for the deities and through them the deities make their wishes known or give prophetic answers to questions which are submitted to them. For the oracles, ceremonial garments and headdresses are very important. The kind of garments and headdresses used depends on the nature of the deity or the characteristics of the particular class of supernatural beings to which it is supposed to belong.<sup>245</sup> Mirrors are also frequently used as ritual objects by oracles. Mirrors not only allow the gods to express themselves, with the oracle acting as an intermediary who can also provide relevant explanations, but also reflect and reveal the hidden aspects of a certain situation.<sup>246</sup>

However, there are cases where mediums neither wear garments and headdresses nor use mirrors. These mediums are very popular in a ritual called *glu-rol*<sup>247</sup> in eastern Tibet, especially in the Reb-gong area in Qinghai. These mediums represent local guardians and mountain deities, and the term *lha-pa* is more popular than the terms *sku-brten* and *chos-rje* in this area.<sup>248</sup> The mediums communicate to ordinary people through unintelligible words, songs, and hand gestures. It is believed that they speak a divine language (*lha-skad*) when they go into a trance. These mediums wear a normal Tibetan robe, with two khatas tied around their upper body in a cross, boots, and a small *thangka* around their neck, a blessed thread and an amulet.<sup>249</sup>

## 7.4 Other altered states of consciousness

Revenants are people whose consciousness are believed to have gone to the realm of the dead and returned to the world of living, and who have visited the Buddhist hells. They return to the living

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<sup>242</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 409.

<sup>243</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 409-410. gNas-chung is a name of a place in Lhasa.

<sup>244</sup> Samuel 1993: 291.

<sup>245</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 410.

<sup>246</sup> Diemberger 2005: 134-135.

<sup>247</sup> This is a ritual that takes place around the middle of the sixth Tibetan month. It consists of a series of dances, sacrifices, propitiation of local deities and rites that celebrate village solidarity and purity, long life and fertility. (Epstein and Peng 1998:120-138).

<sup>248</sup> Danzang Cairang 2009: 163. See also Nagano 2000: 567-649; sNying bo rgyal and Rino 2008; Buffertrille 2008; dPal ldan bkra shis and Stuart 1998; and Epstein and Peng 1998.

<sup>249</sup> Danzang Cairang 2009: 163.

with a message that informs them of the torments to which sinners are subject there. Revenants are consulted by fellow villagers for advice, and they have regular séances during which they again visit the hell-realms and report on their experiences.<sup>250</sup>

Visionary bards are people who sing versions of the widely-known Tibetan epic Gesar according to their own visionary experiences in which they have memories of a past life in which the bard was one of Gesar's followers. These bards are usually illiterate nomads.<sup>251</sup>

Finders of hidden treasure (*gter-bton*) fall into two categories: those who discover actual material treasure (*sa-gter*) and those who find treasure in their own consciousness or through visions (*dgongs-gter*). Treasures include not only texts and teachings but also information about the location of material objects such as images and hidden valleys (*sbas-yul*) that are suitable for retreats or for escape from dangerous situations.<sup>252</sup>

People believed to be possessed by spirits of the deceased also have experiences of altered states of consciousness. This kind of phenomenon is often considered to be malignant. It is believed that a person may turn into a malignant spirit after his death if he dies too suddenly, person for example he has been murdered, killed in a fight or has died in an accident. Revenge is another motive which may result in a man turning into a malignant spirit after his death.<sup>253</sup> It is also believed that those who have a strong attachment to their families have a high possibility of becoming a malignant spirit after their death.<sup>254</sup> An altered state of consciousness that is very similar to that of the 'descent of blessings' occurs in the context of the *lha-'beb* ritual in Trinde<sup>255</sup> County in Yushu<sup>256</sup> Prefecture. This ritual is also performed in order to obtain blessings. The heightened state of consciousness experienced during the *lha-'beb* is considered to be very important.<sup>257</sup> During the trance people loll their heads and shake their arms. Some of them utter

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<sup>250</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 550. See also Paul 1976: 143; Samuel 1993: 292-293; Epstein 1982.

<sup>251</sup> Samuel 1993:293-295. See also Yang 1989 and 1990.

<sup>252</sup> Samuel 1993: 295. See also Dargyay 1985; Kapstein 1989; Thondup 1986; Aris 1975; Reinhard 1978; Bernbaum 1980; Diemberger 1990.

<sup>253</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 417.

<sup>254</sup> There is an example that shows how a Buddhist monk became a malignant ghost after he committed suicide. Finally, the abbot of the sMan-ri Shes-rab dgongs-rgyal compelled him to be a protector of Bon. See Kværne 1996:112 and Karmay 1975: 200-201.

<sup>255</sup> A remote, nomadic and agricultural county in Yushu Prefecture.

<sup>256</sup> An autonomous prefecture in the southwest of Qinghai province.

<sup>257</sup> Meriam 2012: 183.

mantras or prayers, talk in different voices and speak melodious dialogues that only certain people can understand.<sup>258</sup>

## 7.5 The ‘descent of blessings’ associated with Chos-thog chen-mo

The focus of this section is the laypeople’s faith (*dad-pa*) and how the expression of people’s faith has been changing over the past few years. I have often visited the villages where the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual takes place to see the ritual dance. In November 2007, some women told me of their inexpressible faith when they saw the ritual dance, that they felt like crying but could not. In 2010, I went to see ritual dances in two different villages.<sup>259</sup> The practice of the ritual was the same as I had seen before, but the laypeople’s reactions to the ritual dance differed. As I said above, in 2007 people told me that they experienced strong faith and that they wanted to cry, but did not. In 2010, people went into a trance called the ‘descent of blessings’ (*byin-’bebs*) during the ritual dance, and some cried loudly and even started to dance.

The ‘descent of blessings’ looks very similar to the spirit-medium trance that is very popular in Reb-gong, but my informant Nyi-ma told me that it differs significantly in that a ‘trance’ usually occurs when a deity possesses a medium, through whom they communicate with the laity. If people have strong faith and the deity or lama is powerful enough to grant blessings to the laity, the phenomenon of the ‘descent of blessings’ occurs. This can be seen from the literal meaning of the word *byin-’bebs*. *Byin* is an abbreviation of *byin-rlabs*, which refers to the power or blessing of a lama or a deity<sup>260</sup> granted to people, and *’bebs* ‘to cause to descend’.<sup>261</sup> Here it could signify ‘to consecrate’.

People fall into a trance when the ritual dance takes place and sometimes during the ritual as well. People who fall into a trance change their facial expression, some of them cry or laugh, while others dance, jump, and make ritual gestures.<sup>262</sup> Some pray by saying a prayer to their ‘root

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<sup>258</sup> Meriam 2012: 180.

<sup>259</sup> In November 2009 I was in Gling-rgya and in January 2010 in was in Khyung-po.

<sup>260</sup> Das, Sandbery and Heyde 1902:888.

<sup>261</sup> Das, Sandbery and Heyde 1902: 921.

<sup>262</sup> The two typical ritual gestures are (1) the middle and ring fingers pressed to the palm with the thumb and the other two fingers extended, and (2) the palms placed together and raised up to the forehead. Usually the former happens at the beginning of the trance and latter at the end of trance.

lama' (*rtsa-ba'i bla-ma*), their 'precious lama' (*bla-ma rin-po che*),<sup>263</sup> or sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo. My informant Nyi-ma explained to me that a great lama or a great deity consecrates the minds of people who have strong faith. He said that the heightened consciousness of those who experience this is very important. Whilst in the trance, people become more compassionate and have an awakened mind by reducing their hatred, ignorance, desire, arrogance, and jealousy. This phenomenon became popular in the five main Bon communities in Reb-gong in around 2008. Both men and women experience the 'descent of blessings', but women are usually in the majority. I asked many people why this phenomenon happens at this particular time, and I always got the same answer: it is because people's faith becomes stronger and purer than before. This is probably a good explanation, because religious activities and institutions have become more organized than they were before 2000. However, this is a question that could be answered in different ways based on more data. Traditionally in Reb-gong, oracles and spirit-mediums are always male, and some in the Bon community are critical of the recent phenomenon of female *lha-pa*.<sup>264</sup>

## **7.6 History of the 'descent of blessings' in the five Bon communities in Reb-gong**

People have various opinions about the 'descent of blessings'. Not all Bonpos believe that the 'descent of blessings' represents genuine communication or influence from deities. When the 'descent of blessings' trance began to become widespread in 2008, many people found the phenomenon shocking. Most people agree that this phenomenon can at least prove one thing: that formless beings (*gzugs-med-kyi sems-can*) exist.

Those who have knowledge of the Bon tradition say that this is not a totally new phenomenon, but that it was very widespread in Reb-gong before the Cultural Revolution. My informant Nyi-ma told me that the 'descent of blessings' is explained in two ritual texts: the transmission of the deity dBal-gsas entitled *Shes-rab glog-gi dbang-'phrin* and a text from the *rDzogs-chen yul-gru*

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<sup>263</sup> These are two expressions that people use when praying to their lamas.

<sup>264</sup> This is the Tibetan view of woman's social status, that women are not as capable as men, and that they lack men's intellectual capacities. This is signified by the word *skye-dman* which refers to women, and literally means 'inferior birth'. The fact that being born as woman means having an inferior birth in Tibetan culture is also discussed by Aziz 1989: 79-82 and Janet Gyatso and Havnevik (eds.) 2005: 9.

*tha-sad* entitled *mKha’-’gro rin-chen phreng-ba’i rgyan*. He told me that it is said in these texts that during the ‘descent of blessings’ people’s facial expressions change, and they may dance, jump, cry, laugh, or say meaningless words (*gtam-med-kyi tshig*).

The ‘descent of blessings’ was extremely popular in Reb-gong during the time of sKyang-sprul Lung-rtogs rgya-mtsho<sup>265</sup>, and Bon-brgya sKu-skyes nam-mkha’ rgya-mtsho<sup>266</sup>. Many *bon-gshen* went into the ‘descent of blessings’ trance when sKyang-sprul Lung-rtogs rgya-mtsho came to Reb-gong in 1944 to attend the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual.<sup>267</sup> In addition, many people went into trance whenever these two lamas gave transmissions (*dbang-lung*)<sup>268</sup> and it is said that those who experienced the ‘descent of blessings’ could not stop going into trance until the lama ordered them to stop.

However, from the time of the Cultural Revolution, the ‘descent of blessings’ trance was not seen until 1999. In 1999, a monk from Bon-rgya monastery in Reb-gong experienced the ‘descent of blessings’ when A-lags Bon-brgya was giving a transmission. Everyone was shocked at seeing him going into trance, and many said that he must have been suffering from some kind of illness and should be taken to the hospital. But the lama confirmed that he was not sick, but experiencing the ‘descent of blessings’. He also told him that this was very good, and washed him with water that had been blessed. In addition, the lama said that no one should hold him when he was going into a trance, because holding him might bring him the risk of getting the sickness of *grib*. From then on, the phenomenon has spread rapidly. Monks began to experience the ‘descent of blessings’, then *bon-gshen* and finally laypeople.

## 7.7 Collective description of the descent of blessing

In the following, I will describe several people’s actions when they were experiencing the ‘descent of blessings’ trance based on my observation in five Bon communities in Reb-gong from 2009 to 2011.

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<sup>265</sup> A disciple of Shar-rdza rin-po che (1859-1934) (Achard 2008: 5,109).

<sup>266</sup> A lama of Bon-brgya-’brog village.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with informant O-rgyal in Khyung-po village, July, 2011.

<sup>268</sup> See Chapter Two.

### 7.7.1 Gling-rgya bon-tshang-ma village, October 2009

Around one o'clock in the afternoon, people gradually began to assemble in the temple courtyard. At about 2.30 pm, the conch-blower summoned the *bon-gshen* to the assembly hall where they began chanting. As they chanted, different kinds of preparations for the afternoon ritual dance took place in the courtyard, including chalking out the space, arranging carpet seats for the *bon-gshen* and carrying out the flags. Eventually, the first part of the ritual dance took place and it ended with the *bon-gshen* seated on both sides of the entrance of the main assembly hall with the two monastic disciplinarians seated on higher seats. Later A-lags Bon-brgya joined them, and sat on the throne in the middle.

The male members of the audience assembled on the right hand side of the main assembly hall, the female members of the audience and children on the left and on both sides of the main entrance. I heard from the audience that there were not many spectators from other villages as people were quite busy at that time.

Afterwards, the main ritual dance took place and towards the latter part of it a dancer dressed as sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo entered. To greet her, *bsang* offerings were made, conch shells, shawms, and usually a pair of the great trumpet were blown, drums and cymbals were played, firecrackers were set off and 'windhorses' (*rlung-rta*) were thrown into the air. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sat on a low bench covered with felt and with two *keng-rus* at either side of the bench. Numerous men offered khatas. Four *bon-gshen* stood beside her and read out her 'generation' text (*bskyed-pa*). Some people prostrated to sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo. Several *bon-gshen* and people from the audience began to go into trance. The first person to fall into a trance was a young woman of about thirty who emerged from a group of women standing to the left of the temple courtyard's main gate. Her body started shaking and, after a few minutes, she started making ritual gestures, and then danced into the inner spaces of the ritual dance grounds. She danced several times around the *zlog-gtor* at the centre of the chalk circle within which the masked dances were taking place, in an anti-clockwise direction. About six or seven female spectators reacted by shaking, prostrating and invoking the 'root lama' (*rtsa-ba'i bla-ma*), the 'precious lama' (*bla-ma rin-po che*) and sGra bla'i rgyal mo. Some elderly women began prostrating, proclaiming 'truly sGra-bla' rgyal-mo has come to this place'. A man in his late thirties then also began to shake. As his trance became more pronounced he started calling sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo sTag-ri-rong and moving into the chalk circle,

but not walking around the *zlog-gtor*. One *bon-gshen* made sure the man did not approach the dancer representing the deity too closely, and guided him back to the edge of the chalk circle. The men there supported him under his arms while he swayed from side to side as the woman in the trance continued to dance with *sGra bla'i rgyal mo*. His trance subsided soon after that of the woman. She returned to her mother and sister. Her mother fixed her disheveled clothing and we heard her gently scolding her daughter, asking why she had behaved like that in public. The woman cried, replying that she was out of control, and so couldn't have acted otherwise. The events ended with the *zlog-gtor* being carried out through the main entrance of the temple.

### 7.7.2 Kyung-po village, January 2010

As was the case in Gling-rgya bon-tshang-ma village, around one o'clock in the afternoon conch shells were blown to summon the *bon-gshen* and preparations were made during their chanting. Some of the younger men climbed onto the temple roof with their offerings. They made a *bsang* offering, threw windhorses and set off firecrackers when the ritual dance was about to start. After making their offerings, they remained there watching the ritual dance from the roof. The *bon-gshen* were seated in front of the main assembly hall, having completed their first dance. The older men were on the right-hand side of the main assembly hall and the women and children were on the left, and on both sides of main entrance of the temple. As usual the main dance started after the first dance. After about twenty minutes, the spectators from other villages rushed to the Khyung-po temple to see the dance. Some of those presents informed me that a local basketball competition that was taking place in the village that day had just finished, so people had come to see the dance. During the first hour of the dance, the spectators were quite calm.

About an hour into the dance, all the dancers entered led by two *gshin-rje*, and began circling counter-clockwise.<sup>269</sup> Several of the spectators began to go into trance at this point. The first person to fall into a trance was the same woman who had fallen into a trance in my first observation in Gling-rgya bon-tshang-ma village. Her body started shaking and she looked around among the spectators as if to make sure that nobody was watching her. Then, after a few minutes, she started to lose control of herself making ritual gestures with her hands. Then she

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<sup>269</sup> Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo (1), bTsan-dmu-dpon (2), A-bse rgyal-ba (2), rMa-chen spom-ra (1), Shel-khrab-can (1), *keng-rus* (2), and mChod-'bul lha-mo (2).



danced into the inner space of the ritual dance ground and joined the dancers. She danced in a similar way to sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo and her movements were quicker than the other dancers'. After circling the dance ground three or four times she returned to her seat and tried to calm herself down. Several *bon-gshen* also fell into trance and joined the dancers. Their movements were quite slow and they called on sTag-ri-rong constantly. Several young women also displayed signs of going into a trance. The woman who had gone into a trance first rushed to join the dancers again. Then all the dancers exited and the spectators became calm again.

About half an hour later, a dancer representing sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo entered and as usual she was greeted with *bsang* offerings, music and firecrackers. She sat on the low bench and her 'generation' text was read out. People offered khatas and prostrated to her. Several spectators began to fall into trance. This time there were many of them, and most were invoking the 'root lama', the 'precious lama', or sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo, placing their palms together and raising their hands to their foreheads. Some of them, including three or four young girls, were crying very loudly. One woman said, "What's happening to these girls?" and said that they must have some kind of heart problem. The woman mentioned above who had been the first to go into a trance danced into the inner space of the dance ground while the dancer representing sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo was still sitting on his low bench. Soon after, the dancer representing sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo began to dance too, and at this a young girl also fell into a trance and moved into the chalk circle. She did not circle the dance ground, but instead stayed at the edge of the chalk circle and made very beautiful ritual gestures as well as singing melodious songs. The dancer representing sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo was still dancing, as was the woman. By this time she was making different movements, prostrating to the main assembly hall and the *btsan-khang*, and hopping from foot to foot. One older *bon-gshen* brought out a long yellow silk scarf from the *btsan-khang*, put it around her neck and tied it under her right arm. Soon after this, a young boy fell into a trance, rushed into the inner space of the dance ground and began to dance furiously. Several *bon-gshen* tried to get hold of him, but they failed. However, after dancing in several furious circles he collapsed on the ground with his palms together. At this time, several *bon-gshen* came and lifted him under his arms. He swayed from side to side as the woman and the young girl experiencing the trance continued to dance with sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo. Most people's trance subsided soon after the dancers exited. The young girl's trance did not subside very easily, however, she was in a trance until the next morning, and her family had to stay awake all night because she had to go to

the village temple several times. She cried very loudly and called, “Mother, I miss you very much” when she entered the main assembly hall. The next morning her parents took her to A-lags Bon-rgya who gave her a blessed thread and she came out of the trance.<sup>270</sup>

### 7.7.3 rGyal-bo ngo-mo village, January 2011<sup>271</sup>

The seating arrangements in rGyal-bo ngo-mo village were same as in the two villages described above, and sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo was greeted in the same way. People fell into trance at the appearance of sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo. All of them were men, no women fell into trance in this village. The first person to fall into a trance was a *bon-gshen* in his thirties. As sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo entered the ritual dance ground, this man also rushed into the chalk circle and danced. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo made three circles around the courtyard and sat on the low bench. Four *bon-gshen* read out her ‘generation’ text and men stood in line to offer her khatas. The second person to fall into a trance was a young man of about twenty who was standing in the line. He first cried out very loudly, and then rushed into the chalk circle to dance. At this point another man of about forty rushed into the chalk circle and danced furiously. He tried to stamp on the *zan-ling* several times also, but two *bon-gshen* came and guided him to the edge of the circle by his arms. Another *bon-gshen* in his forties rushed out in front of Gra-bla'i rgyal-mo who was dancing on the low bench. Another young *bon-gshen* prostrated to sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo, slamming his forehead hard onto the ground, while another two men were dancing in the midst of the crowd. sGra-bla'i rgyal-mo slowly rose from her seat and began to circle the *zlog-gtor* anti-clockwise. The man who tried stamp on the *zan-ling* was being held by two men at the edge of the chalk circle; he was still making furious movements, sometimes making ritual gestures and sometimes raising his large rosary above his head. However, after four or five minutes he placed his palms together, raised them above his head and subsided from the trance. At this point most of the others also subsided from their trance. The movements made whilst in a trance are quite free in this village because people are not generally held by others. People fall into and come out of trance and then sit calmly. Nobody seemed shocked and they did not appear to regard the phenomenon as anything out of the ordinary.

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<sup>270</sup> Interview with a member of the girl's family.

<sup>271</sup> This information is based on video footage that was taken by my husband who visited the village to observe the ritual dance.

#### 7.7.4 rGyal-bo a-rgya-sting village, October 2011

I had the opportunity to see the whole ritual in this village and observed the ‘descent of blessings’ taking place not only during the ritual dance but also during the chanting. Three or four *bon-gshen* in the second or third row fell into a trance and started making various furious ritual gestures. Some of them made the gestures whilst kneeling. In addition, one woman in her forties who was the wife of the second day’s *khri-pa bla-ma* fell into a trance when the feast offering (*tshogs-rdzas*) was brought to the village temple. Three young girls from her family tried to catch hold of her and calm her down, but their efforts were in vain. Later, an old woman said “Do not hold her”. She made very beautiful gestures for five or six minutes whereafter the trance subsided and she went out of the temple. She returned after about ten minutes and seemed very calm.

On the third day, people fell into trance at the appearance of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo, and particularly when her ‘generation’ text was being read. Altogether, seven men fell into trance: three *bon-gshen* and four young men. Several *bon-gshen* who were watching the dance also displayed signs of trance. Their bodies were shaking and they made ritual gestures. One unusual occurrence was that the dancer representing sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo also fell into a trance. This could be discerned by his quick movements and very loud crying. At first, the musicians appeared to be unsure as to how to accompany the dance. Then A-lags Bon-brgya, who was sitting on the second floor of the temple, gave the signal to play the music. The musicians played as usual and the dancer danced as usual. During the dance, A-lags Bon-brgya and others threw ‘windhorses’. The dancer was still in a trance when the dance finished. Two *bon-gshen* supported him under his arms and brought him to the main assembly hall. After a while his trance subsided. A woman told me that if the dancer is faithful and keeps himself from doing sinful things like killing and sleeping with his wife for one month before the ritual dance, there is a good possibility of him falling into a trance. So the dancer’s trance proves that he is faithful and pure. This, however, is considered to be a rare occurrence. The villagers claim that only one other dancer from rGyal-bo ngo-mo village had ever fallen into a trance. In addition, a dancer representing sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo fell into a trance during the ritual dance that took place in Bon-rgya monastery on 21 October 2010. Some even say that the dancer was not dancing on the ground, but in the air. At that time,

the musician could not play and A-lags Bon-rgya played the drum.<sup>272</sup>

## 7.8 Experiences of the ‘descent of blessings’

I conducted three interviews with people who have experienced trance.

### 7.8.1 Interview one:

The first time I went into a trance was when our village held a religious activity called ‘ten thousand lamps’ (*khri-mchod*)<sup>273</sup> in 2007. I had an inexpressible feeling of faith (*dad-pa*) when I saw the lamps, and this reminded me of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo. The women were having a fasting ritual (*snyung-gnas*)<sup>274</sup> during those two days. I can’t remember everything that happened, but people said that I jumped quite high with my legs crossed. I felt very sore and tired when I came out of the trance later, and my legs were covered in bruises. Unexpectedly, the bruises had disappeared the next morning and I felt very comfortable. Since then, I go into a trance whenever there is an important religious activity. There are several things that cause me to fall into a trance. I feel as if I get a call when I hear people reciting the ‘expiation’ (*bskang-pa*) of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo, or when I see the thangka of Byams-ma. I feel strong faith and my heart become very soft. In addition, I lose control completely when I see sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo during the ritual dance. First, my energy channels feel numb (*rtsa rud-pa*) and then when I go into the trance, my whole body feels numb. I am aware of what I am doing, but I am not in control. I feel very angry when people try to hold me. Sometimes I come out of the trance when I become aware that everyone is watching me.

When I asked her why she thought that she was always the one to go into a trance, she replied:

I think the most important thing is that you should have strong faith. If you have faith, the protector deity (sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo) will always take you under her protection. I also know this from a dream I have had a nomadic woman riding on a black mule coming to me with a smiling face. I think that it is also because of my family background. All of the former generations of my family venerated sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo and my family also owns a mask of her. My grandmother

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<sup>272</sup> Interview with a Bon-gshen from Khyung-po village in October 2011.

<sup>273</sup> This is a ritual during which one hundred thousand lamps are offered and ritual texts are chanted.

<sup>274</sup> See Chapter One.

especially always recited the ‘expiation’ of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo and had strong faith in her. My grandmother, who had already passed away, appeared beside the pillars when our village temple was being built in 1982. People from my village believe that her appearance at that time was a manifestation of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo.

### 7.8.2 Interview two:

The first time I fell into a trance was when I went back to my parents’ home during Losar in 2008 and watched a movie that showed how lamas from Sichuan province practice religion. In particular, I saw a lama who was in retreat who only ate plants that grew on the mountain. I felt deep admiration and faith for him. Then I felt my whole body become numb (*rud-pa*) and I went into a trance. I couldn’t remember anything clearly, but later my family told me that I asked them to bring a wooden sword that was kept in our shrine and that had been passed down from generation to generation. They said I cried for a while when they gave me the sword and that I said I had missed it very much. Since then, I go into a trance whenever there is religious activity; I am especially out of control at the appearance of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo during the ritual dance. My sisters and nieces fall into trance whenever a religious activity takes place at our home, but my brother scolds us and says we are ‘missing energy channels’ (*rtsa-mi-tshang-pa*).<sup>275</sup> When all of us fall into a trance at the same time, he sometimes gets so angry that we come out of the trance.

When I asked her the same question, as to why she thought that she was always the one to go into a trance, she replied in the same way as the previous interviewee:

I recite the ‘expiation’ of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo every day and I always dream about a black mule. I also think this is related to my family background because the previous generations of my family, including my father, were faithful religious practitioners (*chos-pa rnam-dag*).

### 7.8.3 Interview three:

I fell into a trance at the appearance of sGra-bla’i rgyal-mo during the ritual dance in 2008. Since then, I go into a trance very often, especially when I prostrate in the morning and evening, and when A-lags Bon-rgya is giving transmissions. When I am about to fall into a trance I feel

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<sup>275</sup> According to tantric Buddhism, human body consists of a network of large and small channels through which the life force flows.

my whole body go numb, I experience a strong pressure that feels like air in my belly and my heart becomes very kind. I have some feeling during my trance, for example I can feel other people touching me, but I can hardly remember what I am doing. I think the most important thing that causes people to fall into a trance is related to their faith. As we see, the people who fall into trance are mostly women because they have very kind hearts and their faith is very pure.

I also conducted interviews with people who have not experienced a trance:

This is totally a new phenomenon. I am now over eighty years old but I have never seen such things in my life. I do not know what it is but I feel that it is quite mysterious.<sup>276</sup>

I heard there are many female *lha-pa* in Bon villages. I have never heard of or seen such things in my life. I think it is either a sign that the Bon religion will prosper in the future or that it will disappear.<sup>277</sup>

My eyes fill with tears constantly when I see those people who fall into trance. It reminds me that it is understandable that people have so much suffering in life, because I can see that the deities also have their own suffering, as many of them cry a lot during their trance.<sup>278</sup>

This trance phenomenon proves to me that our Tibetan belief in gods and ghosts is true. In addition, it proves to me that as long as we have faith, gods always take us under their protection.<sup>279</sup>

This phenomenon is very much like *lha-pa* in other villages. The only difference is that most of them are women, which is interesting.<sup>280</sup>

This is the first time I have seen this phenomenon. I felt that it was very interesting and mysterious, and it proves at least one thing to me: that there are formless spirits in this world.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Interview with an old woman from Khyung-po village in 2008.

<sup>277</sup> Interview with an old man from sKa bar-ma village in 2009.

<sup>278</sup> Interview with a young woman in her twenties in 2010.

<sup>279</sup> Interview with a woman in her forties in 2010.

<sup>280</sup> Interview with man in his thirties in 2010.

<sup>281</sup> Interview with a man in his thirties in 2011.

Those people are ‘missing energy channels’ and so they have this kind of experience.<sup>282</sup>

From the above interviews we can see that people have different ideas about trance. However, there are four main things about the ‘descent of blessings’ that differentiate it from other types of trance in Tibet. Firstly, those who experience the ‘descent of blessings’ fall into trance spontaneously; secondly, most of them are women; thirdly, this phenomenon only occurs in Bon communities in Reb-gong, not in Buddhist communities; finally, it is a new phenomenon that occurred after the Cultural Revolution, and does not seem to be caused by outside influence, but rather has its origins within the community. These are probably the four main reasons why people have different opinions about the ‘descent of blessings’.

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<sup>282</sup> Interview with a man in his fifties in 2008.

## 8. Chapter Eight: MERIT AND VIRTUE ASSOCIATED WITH CHOS-THOG CHEN-MO

As mentioned in the first chapter, Bonpos and Buddhists share a common Tibetan heritage, and thereby follow the same method of accumulating religious merit (*bsod-nams bsags-pa*) and performing virtuous acts (*dge-ba sgrub-pa*), with the ultimate goal of obtaining rebirth in a future life as human being or as an inhabitant of one of the many paradisiacal worlds of Tibetan cosmology.<sup>283</sup> One's present status is the result of meritorious and non-meritorious actions in this life as well as in previous lifetimes.<sup>284</sup> The methods of accumulating merit include ritual practices such as turning prayer wheels, circumambulating sacred places, putting up prayer flags, and chanting sacred formulas. Institutionalized actions are also of major importance for accumulating merit. Such actions can include gaining merit by acting as a donor (*sbyin-bdag*) who supports religious institutions by building monasteries, supporting the copying of books and holding religious ceremonies. The effects of both meritorious and non-meritorious actions performed on holy and auspicious days are said to be magnified.

Chos-thog chen-mo is a typical example of a virtuous act performed in order to accumulate merit. This is exemplified in particular by the donor roles within the ritual and individual activities that occur during the ritual. Those who donate money for the ritual are said colloquially to 'cook' the ritual (*chos-thog skol-ba*). It is the monastic disciplinarian, *khri-pa bla-ma* and chanting master (*dbu-mdzad*) who donate the money for the ritual. In order to take on any of these roles one's financial circumstances must be good. The monastic disciplinarian and the *khri-pa bla-ma* must donate money for the ritual. The chanting master is not obliged to donate, but he can do so if he wishes. If the monastic disciplinarians or chanting master are taking part in Chos-thog chen-mo in another Bon community, they are not expected to donate.

The costs associated with the ritual include paying for the meals and the 'feast offering' (*tshogs-rdzas*), giving alms ('gyed) to the *bon-gshen*, and buying gifts for A-lags Bon-brgya. If no-one donates the necessary funds, the village will provide meals for the *bon-gshen* but they will not receive any alms during the ritual.

The meals for the ritual are quite expensive. Breakfast and lunch usually consist of five pieces

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<sup>283</sup> Kværne 1996: 12.

<sup>284</sup> G.E. Clark 1990: 174.



of home-made fried bread, one bowl of tsampa and several pieces of butter for each person, whilst dinner is usually rice with butter, sugar and white raisins or noodle soup with mutton.

Providing the ‘feast offering’ is another of the donor’s tasks and this is also quite expensive. The feast offering usually consists of a special kind of bread as big as a medium-sized plate on which different pictures such as flowers and coins have been stamped, as well as a large quantity of fruit, candy, and different kinds of biscuits. The donor has to bake a large quantity of bread, as the feast offering is distributed among different groups and forms part of the offerings to the deities, to the *bon-gshen* and to the laypeople.

Alms (*’gyed*) refers to the money that the donor contributes to the *bon-gshen*, known colloquially as the offering (*’bul-ba*). This is the most expensive obligation for the donor. Even though it is said that donor may give as much or as little as he can afford, the amount of money contributed usually increases every year. Nowadays, many donors spend much more money than they can afford. Giving alms is a good opportunity for donors to improve their reputation and status by displaying their wealth. If there are three donors for the ritual, this will attract many participants, because more alms will be given. For example, for the fall ritual held in A-rgya-rting village in October 2011, there were three donors (two *khri-pa bla-ma*) and one monastic disciplinarian), and 379 participants. For the spring ritual held in Gling-rgya village in January 2012 there was only one donor (one *khri-pa bla-ma*) and only 183 participants.<sup>285</sup> The gifts for the lama consist of a statue, scripture, stupa and alms. Usually the alms given to the lama are much greater than those given to the *bon-gshen*.

However, when someone is selected to be the donor for the ritual, the older *bon-gshen* from his village accompany him to every household in his village to collect donations. This happens one or two months before the ritual is held. Families are not obliged to give anything, and they may give as much or as little they please. Usually, families are happy to donate money or crops as they believe that such gifts are a particularly good way of accumulating merit, the merit of the gift being increased through the ritual. It is an advantage for the donor if he has numerous relatives in his village or neighboring villages, as he then has a good opportunity to collect many donations.

A monastic disciplinarian for Chos-thog chen-mo should contribute at least 50,000 RMB, which

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<sup>285</sup> Interview with the *khri-pa bla-ma* for the spring ritual in January 2012.

might well represent his life savings. Even people whose financial circumstances are difficult are willing to donate large sums of money. For instance, my uncle, who was the monastic disciplinarian for the Chos-thog chen-mo in October 2001, spent 30,000 RMB on the ritual. His family, though, is very poor; he could not even afford to buy coal for the winter. When I asked him why he was willing to spend so much money on the ritual, he said, “You are just a child, you do not know much.” I hesitantly asked, “Why didn’t you spend that money on traveling? If you travel around the world, you can learn many things.” He said that people, who are only concerned about this life and who only think about how to make this life enjoyable, are very poor and their minds are very narrow. If we are always selfish, then our condition in our next life will remain the same as this life or might even get worse. We should have a long-term vision, and think about our next life. As we have received the gift of being born as a human, we should accumulate merit and perform virtuous actions as much as possible in this life. If we accumulate a lot of merit in this life, we may be born as a human being in our next life, and becoming enlightened in a future life. Tibetans are willing to sacrifice hard-earned money to accumulate merit and perform virtuous acts. However, they do not sacrifice it for nothing. The money is spent to improve their circumstances. This might include decreasing the occurrence of sickness in their family, as well as the ultimate concern of obtaining a good rebirth and eventually becoming enlightened. Even though they receive no tangible gain from this sacrifice, it gives meaning to their lives. This sentiment is echoed by the following voices of two donors, both of whom also emphasize the importance of producing the merit to achieve the ultimate goal of life.

### **8.1 Interview 1:**

I was the monastic disciplinarian in October 2005. It was very expensive. I spent almost 40,000 RMB on meals, the ‘feast offering’, and alms. But I felt so lucky to have the chance to contribute something to Reb-gong Bon-mang (all the *bon-gshen* from Reb-gong), because by doing something for the Reb-gong Bon-mang, the *yi-dam* and Bon protectors will be pleased and will help me to get me through difficult situations. I had the chance to accumulate merit and perform virtuous acts for this life and the next life. However, my ultimate goal is to be enlightened in the future. After I became the monastic disciplinarian, everything improved for me. For example, our family’s financial condition got better and there has been no sickness in my family since then.

## 8.2 Interview 2:

I took on the responsibility of being *khri-pa bla-ma* in January 2009. To be a *khri-pa bla-ma* I have to ask for donations from others and I had difficulties with that. Firstly, some other *bon-gshen* and I went to every household for donations. But later I found I still could not offer the cost of the ritual, so I went to every person who had an official job for donations. Both groups of donors helped me a lot and at the same time I encumbered them a great deal, so I felt guilty. Anyhow, thanks to the donations I successfully fulfilled my responsibility and many benefits have come to me since I was *khri-pa bla-ma*. For example, our family's financial condition is getting better and the occurrence of sickness in my family has also decreased.<sup>286</sup>

Individual laypeople also practice accumulating merit and performing virtuous actions. Laymen who do not participate in the ritual find opportunities to serve the *bon-gshen* as much as possible. For example, they invite *bon-gshen* to their home as guests and offer them accommodation, and help the family of the *khri-pa bla-ma* to cook meals for the *bon-gshen*. In addition, they recite their daily prayers (*kha-'don*) as much as possible on the days of Chos-thog chen-mo. Laywomen clean their houses ready to accommodate the *bon-gshen*, and go to the village temple to prostrate and circumambulate the main assembly hall where the ritual is taking place. Also, many lay people do not eat meat on the days of Chos-thog chen-mo because they believe that this is the best time to produce merit and that the effects of both virtuous and non-virtuous acts will be magnified during Chos-thog chen-mo.

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<sup>286</sup> Tshe-dbang rgyal, b.1942, male, from Khyung-po village.

## 9. Chapter Nine: CHOS-THOG CHEN-MO IN TRANSITION

In this section I discuss the changes that have taken place in the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual since 1958. I discuss the transition that happened after the Cultural Revolution, and then the transitions that have taken place in recent years, especially after 2000, exemplified by changes in the giving of alms, the ‘feast offering’, and meals, by the number of participants and by the nature of the outfits worn by the *bon-gshen* practitioners.

### 9.1 Prohibition and reservation of Chos-thog chen-mo

The suppression of religious practices in Tibet that began with the anti-Chinese uprisings in 1958 in Amdo and 1959 in Lhasa and culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) has ironically had a great impact on their current revitalization. The aim of the Cultural Revolution was to eliminate traditional values carried over from the old society. One of the components of the policy was to eliminate the “four olds”: old customs, habits, culture and thinking. Religion was one of the key targets of the Red Guards and religious practice in Tibet was no exception.<sup>287</sup> Public and private religious activities were forbidden; temples, monasteries and prayer walls were torn down, and religious scriptures and icons were burned or taken away. Monks were forced to disrobe and sent back to their native villages and many lamas and scholars were imprisoned.

Similarly, Chos-thog chen-mo was subject to restrictions. The ritual was forbidden for 23 years, from 1958 to 1981. One of my informants told me that during that period it was a dream to hold a ritual like Chos-thog chen-mo. This does not mean that the ritual was eradicated though. Several *bon-gshen* (at most nine) held the ritual in secret during the night. They did not use any objects which could make sound. They chanted the scriptures and invoked the *yi-dam* in silence. These *bon-gshen* have made a great contribution to the revitalization of Chos-thog chen-mo since 1981.

The death of Mao in 1978 and the subsequent consolidation of power within the CCP by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, as well as Party Secretary Hu Yaobang’s visit to Tibet in 1980 to announce the Party’s new policies, resulted in the reemergence of ‘individual’ religion and a number of temples

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<sup>287</sup> Goldstein 1998: 9.

were reopened in Lhasa.<sup>288</sup>

The arrival of the tenth Panchen Lama Chos-kyi rgyal-mtshan (1938-1989) in Reb-gong in 1980 was the key historical event that helped to revive religion in this area. The Panchen Lama had noted that there were two hundred *bon-gshen* in the huge crowd of people who had come to welcome him. He said that there were many Gelug monasteries in Reb-gong, and that proper monasteries should also be established for the Nyingma and Bon traditions. He offered the monastery a statue of Amitabha (*Tshe-dpag med*) together with one hundred and eight blessed threads (*phyag-'dud*) and he also donated 1,800 RMB for the reconstruction of the monastery and gave A-lag Bon-brgya responsibility for the revitalization of Bon in this region.<sup>289</sup> Official permission was granted by the local government the following year, and Bon-rgya monastery and the village temples were rebuilt and rituals started to be performed again. As Goldstein states, "... some individual cultural traits have reemerged identical with the past, but others have reappeared somewhat changed, and still others have not reemerged at all."<sup>290</sup> The first Chos-thog chen-mo after the Cultural Revolution was held in the village of Khyung-bo la-kha in Hor-nag Township in 1981. The first three or four times the revitalized ritual was held after the Cultural Revolution, it was led by a chanting master from Gling-rgya Bon-tshang-ma village who had performed the same role before 1958. However, a small change was made to the scriptures to be chanted, on the orders of A-lags Bon-brgya. The text entitled *Kun-bzang rgyal-ba 'dus-pa'i sgrub-pa*<sup>291</sup>, was abandoned and instead a text called *Tshe-dbang bod-yul ma*<sup>292</sup> is now chanted on the first day. The text entitled *Tshe-dbang gzhung-bzhi'i sgrub-pa*<sup>293</sup> on the second day has been abandoned, and instead, *Yi-dam dbang-chen 'Bum-pa'i dkyil-'khor*<sup>294</sup>, in the spring and *dBal-gsas rngam-pa'i dkyil-'khor*<sup>295</sup> in the fall are chanted on both the second and the third day.<sup>296</sup> Since then, the ritual has been held twice a year. According to one of my informants, the ritual is performed today as it was prior to the Cultural Revolution, except for the change in the texts described above. In fact, it

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<sup>288</sup> Huber 2002: 113.

<sup>289</sup> Bon-brgya 2011: 283.

<sup>290</sup> Goldstein 1998:11.

<sup>291</sup> The mandala of the form of Kun-tu bzang-po called rGyal-ba'i 'dus-pa.

<sup>292</sup> Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin according to the tradition of Tibet.

<sup>293</sup> The four traditions of Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin: the tradition of Zhang-zhung (*Zhang-zhung ma*), the tradition of India (*rGya-gar ma*), the tradition of Tibet (*Bod-yul ma*) (Kværne 1996:120) and no source for the fourth one.

<sup>294</sup> The mandala of the powerful yi-dam 'Bum-pa.

<sup>295</sup> The mandala of fierce dBal-gsas.

<sup>296</sup> Interview with Bon-gshen 'Brug-lha from Khyung-po village in June, 2011.

is now even more complete than before as it is in accordance with the tradition of Bru and sMan-ri<sup>297</sup>.

## 9.2 Changes in alms, the feast offering and meals

The amount of alms that the *bon-gshen* receive from the monastic disciplinarians, *khri-pa bla-ma* and chanting master is one obvious change that has occurred in the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual over the last three decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, *bon-gshen* received only between 2 RMB and 20 RMB from the donors. Since then, the amount of money received as alms has risen consistently. In 2008 *bon-gshen* received on average 150 RMB and by October 2011 this had increased to 500 RMB.<sup>298</sup>

Another change relates to the ‘feast offering’ and meals given to the *bon-gshen*. In the 1980s and 1990s, they received an apple or a pear and a piece of homemade bread as their feast offering. In October 2011 they received different kinds of fruit, such as apples, oranges and pears, as well as candies, various kinds of biscuits and homemade bread, so they needed a large bag to carry all the ‘feast offerings’ home. In addition, laymen, laywomen and children also bring a basket carried on the back (*sle-bo*) to bring their ‘feast offerings’ home.

The meals for the *bon-gshen* during the ritual have also undergone a dramatic change. In the 1980s and 1990s, *bon-gshen* received homemade bread, tsampa and a piece of butter for their breakfast and lunch. Since 2005 the homemade bread has been replaced by a piece of bread bought from Muslim or Chinese bakers in the county town. One of my informants told me that this bread is good both because it looks nicer and because it tastes better. The quality of the evening meal has also improved significantly. Previously, there was little meat in the noodle

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<sup>297</sup> Bru is an important family in the Bon tradition. Bru-chen Nam-mkha’ g.yung-drung and his son Khyung-gi rgyal-mtshan received teachings in metaphysics and cosmology from gShen-chen klu-dga’ (995-1035) (Martin 2001: 93) based on the later’s book *mDzod-phug*, ‘Innermost Treasure’ (Karmay 2007: 60). The teachings were passed down for several generations. Bru-chen Nam-mkha’ g.Yung-drung’s grandson, Bru-rje g.yung-drung founded g.Yas-ru dben-sa kha Monastery in 1072. This monastery became a very important center of learning for Bonpo monks in the twelfth century. Bru rGyal-ba g.yung-drung (1242-1290), one of the series of eighteen learned men educated in the g.Yas-ru dben-sa-kha monastery, was the first head of the monastery. His work, especially on the meditation practice of the Oral Tradition that had originated in the land of Zhang-zhung, has been passed down to the present day. In 1386, the monastery was destroyed by a flood. However, its tradition of monastic discipline and studying philosophy was re-established at sMan-ri monastery, which was founded by mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan. After 1959, the Bru tradition was re-established at sMan-ri Monastery in India and later in Khri-brtan nor-bu rtse Monastery in Nepal (Karmay 2007: 65-66).

<sup>298</sup> Interview with a *bon-gshen* from Khyung-po village in October, 2011.

soup, but nowadays the soup is full of meat.

## 9.4 Participants in Chos-thog chen-mo

As mentioned in Chapter One, there are two groups of participants in Chos-thog chen-mo: *bon-gshen* and recipients (*skal len-pa*). In the 1980s and 1990s, there were on average 700 participants in the ritual, usually slightly more recipients than *bon-gshen*. Since 2003, the number of participants has been falling. In October 2011, there were 385 participants, of whom 60 were recipients. In June 2012, there were only 183 participants, of whom 40 were recipients. The main reason for this change is that many young men and boys go to school or have jobs. Another important reason for this change is that the older *bon-gshen* and A-lags Bon-brgya have stated that the recipients should not receive as much as the *bon-gshen* in alms. In practice, no donors made a distinction when giving alms. In 2003 though, a *khri-pa bla-ma* from Khyung-po village gave the *bon-gshen* significantly more money than the recipients. Since then, the number of recipients participating in the ritual has dramatically decreased.

## 9.5 Costumes of *bon-gshen*

The costumes worn by the *bon-gshen* (*sngags-btsun-gyi tshul*) are very important in Chos-thog chen-mo. The *bon-gshen* need to have long uncut ‘dreadlocks’ of hair wrapped about their heads and covered by a red or brown turban. They have to wear a long skirt as their lower garment (*smad-sham*) and blue or dark red upper garments (*stod-gos*).<sup>299</sup> Nowadays, however, young *bon-gshen* wear Tibetan robes (*bod-lwa*) over Chinese-style t-shirts or coats. They have a long single braid at the back of their head, and during Chos-thog chen-mo they wear fake long hair wrapped around their head.

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<sup>299</sup>Bon-brgya 2011: 238.

## 10. Chapter Ten: CONCLUSION

Rituals are one of the most important components of Tibetan culture, but there is a significant gap between what *bon-gshen* consider to be the deeper meaning of the rituals and laypeople's understanding of them. In order to provide more comprehensive data about this gap, this current thesis is dedicated to the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual, which is performed twice a year, in spring and in fall. All the *bon-gshen* from the five Bon communities in Reb-gong County participate in this ritual and the five communities take it in turns to host it. By examining all aspects of the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual, it can be demonstrated that the ritual can reveal the Tibetan cosmological worldview, which is that the universe is populated by Buddhas, deities, powerful gods and demigods and spirits. In addition, Tibetans believe that the boundary between the human and non-human is permeable, and rituals are often considered to be one of the most important mediums through which communication between humans and non-humans can take place. As for the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual, *bon-gshen* engage in this ritual practice to invoke various deities with the ultimate goal of attaining union with the body of the various deities they invoke and finally requesting them to intervene in worldly matters on their behalf, and to communicate with lesser spirits.

As achieving union with the body of the deities is an important aspect of the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual, the chief deities, Kun-tu bzang po, Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin, dBal-gsas rnam-pa and 'Bum-pa have been described in detail, including their depictions, attire, and their *gtor-ma* which represent them during the ritual. In order to make sense of how communication with the deities and lesser spirits takes place, an account of the ritual has been provided.

Ritual dance is another important aspect of the Chos-thog chen-mo ritual, which is often considered to be a form of entertainment. By examining this aspect of the ritual, it has been demonstrated that it is not entertainment, but rather a practice inherited from many generations to show how the happy and safe lives that all humankind are enjoying now have been granted by deities who have liberated the demons and malignant beings that are represented in the ritual dances and ordered them to be protectors of Bon. In addition, the *zan-ling* is not a representation of the enemy of the individual or the community, but rather a representation of the five poisons that make all humankind suffer. Performing the ritual and the ritual dance means that the five



poisons are expelled, the four elements are balanced and finally the deity that the *zlog-gtor* represents, dBal-gsas or 'Bum-pa, with all his retinue is asked to go the places where sentient beings are suffering, particularly as a result of natural disasters, in order to relieve them from their suffering. There is no text dedicated to the technical details of the performance of the dance (*'cham-yig*), and so the dances currently practiced in the five Bon communities in Reb-gong are passed down from generation to generation. Hopefully, further information about the choreography of the dance can be provided in the future, based on more in-depth research.

The examination of the ritual dance leads to another interesting topic, which is how laypeople's faith is expressed and stimulated during the ritual dance and how this expression has been changing over the past few years, from 2007 to 2011. All in all, people, mostly women, express their faith by falling into a trance called the 'descent of blessings' (*byin- 'bebs*). The indications of this trance include a different facial expression, crying or laughing, dancing, jumping in a wrathful way, making ritual gestures, singing melodious songs and uttering prayers in a very peaceful way. It is believed that those who have pure faith are granted blessings by a lama or a deity. The heightened consciousness of those who experience this is very important. Whilst in trance, people become more compassionate and have an awakened mind by having relatively less hatred, ignorance, desire, arrogance, and jealousy.

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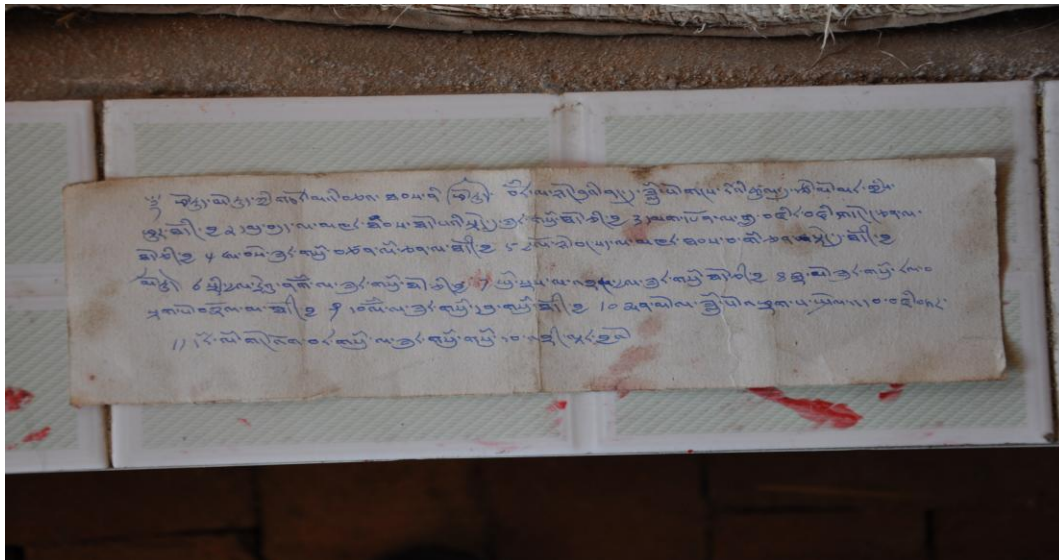
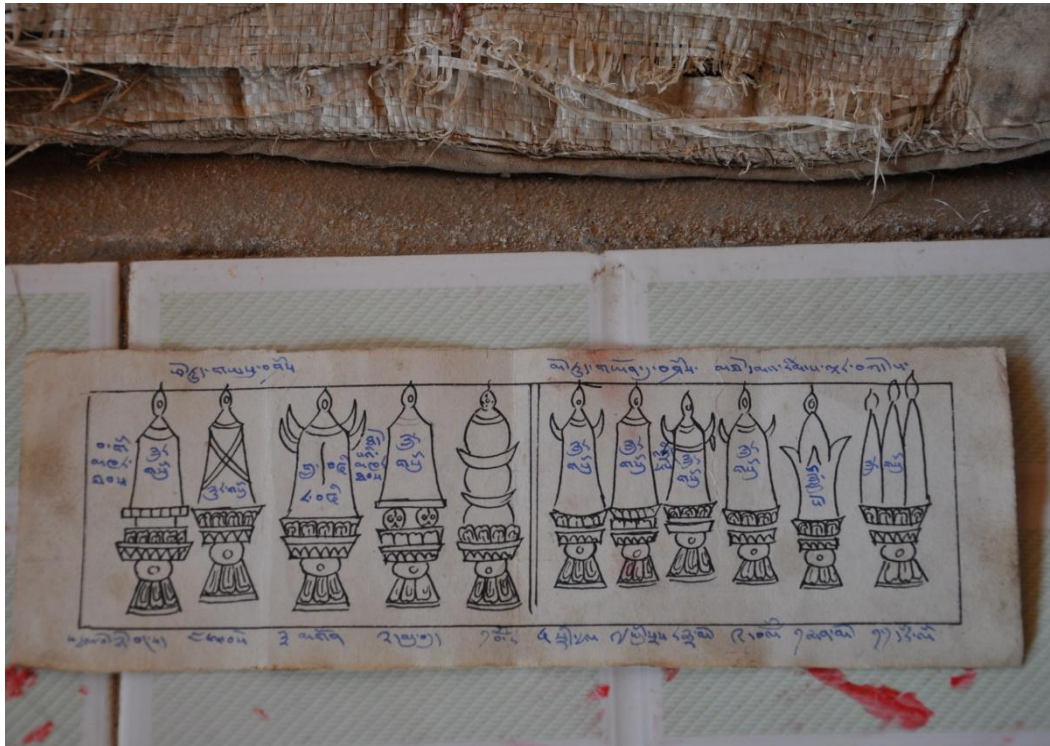
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## APPENDIXS

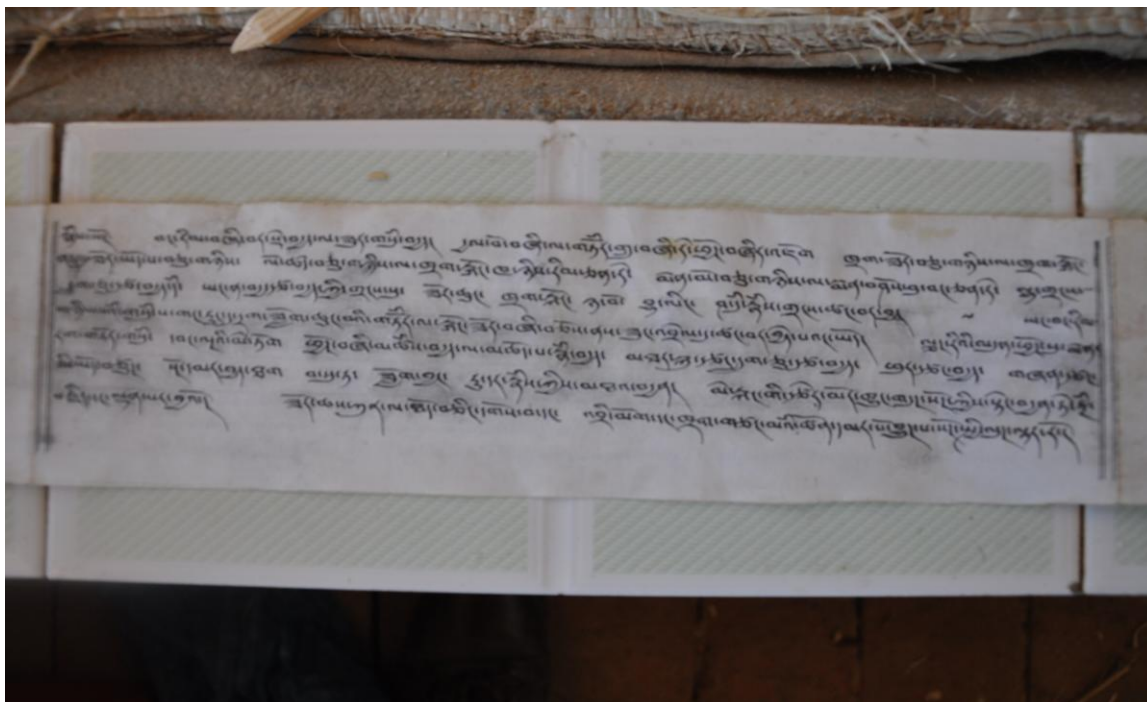
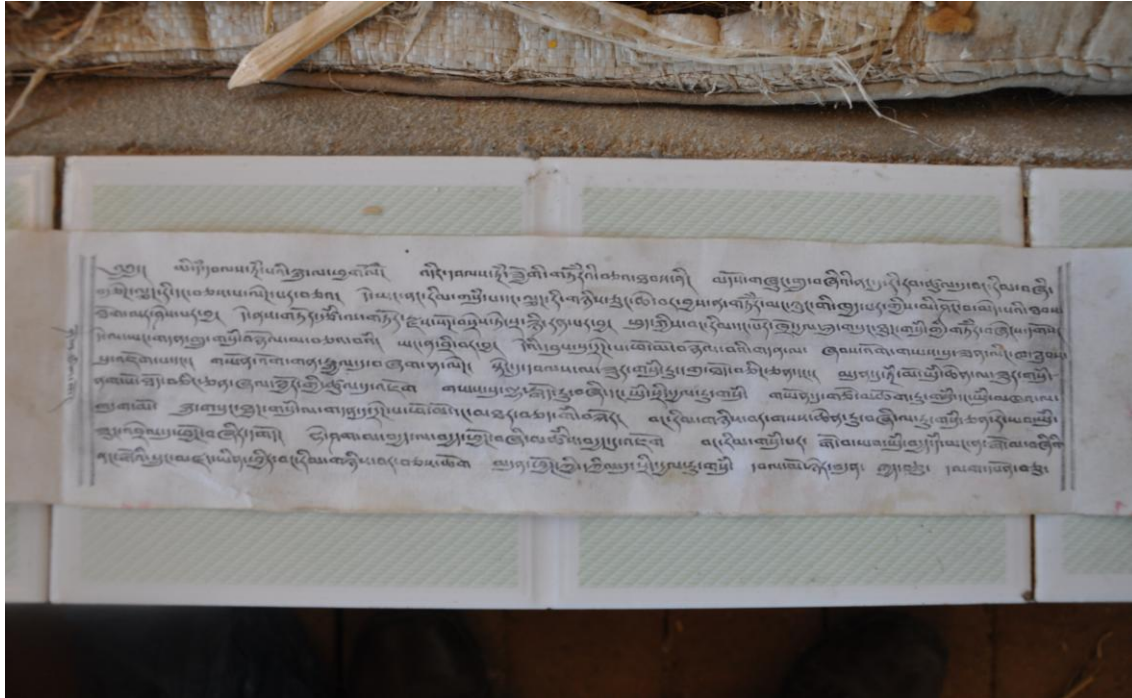
### Appendix 1: Instruction Text



The instruction text for making *gtor-ma* of Bon protectrs in A-rgya-steng village, October, 2011.

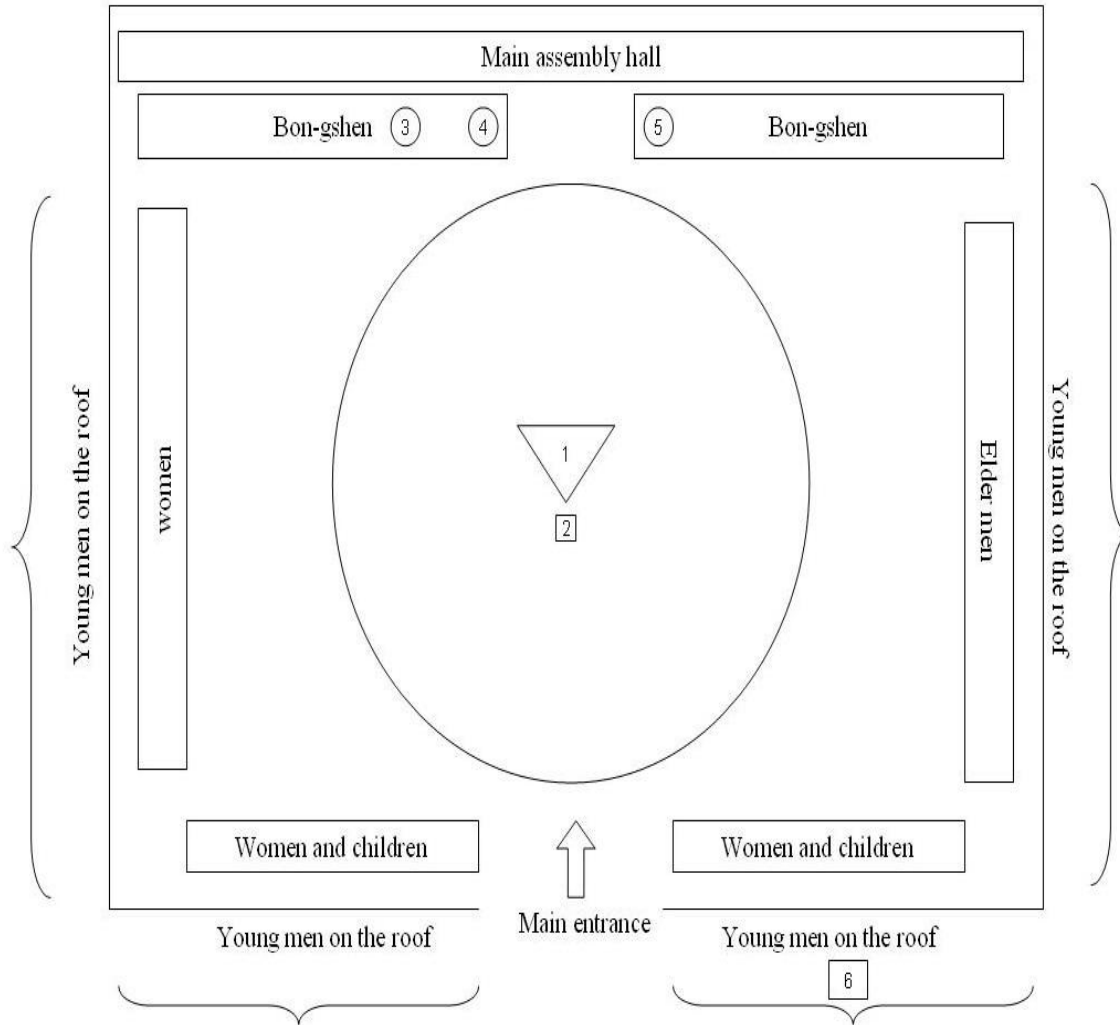


## Appendix 2: Instruction Text



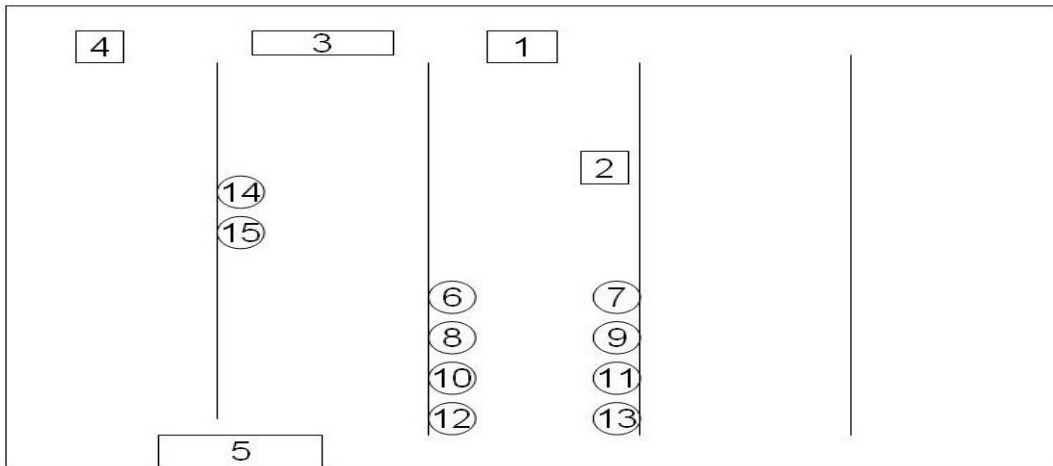
The instruction text of making furious *zlog-gtor* of *dBal-gsa* (*dBal-gsas rngam-zlog gi gtor-ma'i bca'-thabs*) in A-rgya-sting village, October, 2011.

### Appendix 3: Ritual Dance Layout



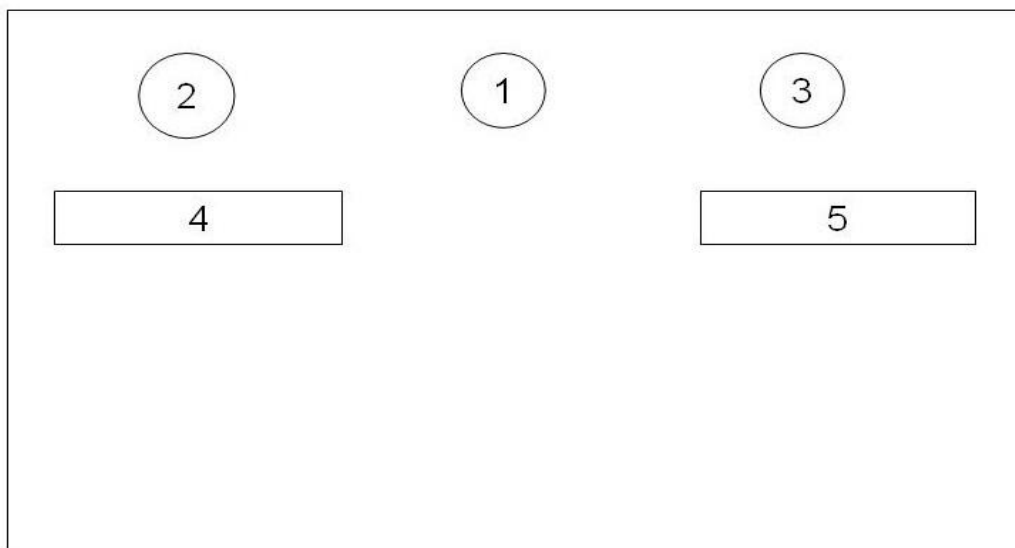
The Ritual Dance Layout of Chos-thog chen-mo in Khyung-po village temple, Janaury, 2010. 1. *Zlog-gtor*, 2. *Zan-ling*, 3. A-lags Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho, 4 and 5 the two monastic disciplinarians, 6. *bSang* offering.

#### Appendix 4: Seating



Seating during of Chos-thog chen-mo in A-rgya steng village, October, 2011. 1. Bon-brgya dGe-legs lhun-grub rgya-mtsho 2. Chanting master 3. *Maṇḍala*, 4. *Khri-pa bla-ma* 5. Two monastic disciplinarians 6.7.8.9. *sBug* players 10.11. Shawm players 14.15 Great trumpet players.

#### Appendix 5: *Maṇḍala* Layout



Layout of *maṇḍala* during Chos-thog chen-mo 1. Tshe-dbang rig-'dzin, 2. Kun-tu bzang-po 3. dBal-gsas rngam-pa 4. Male Bon protectors 5. Female Bon protectors.